# UFOs and Alien Beings – A Christian Worldview Response

*Michael Gleghorn addresses issues related to reports of UFO and alien sightings. He considers the various possible causes before closing with a biblical, Christian perspective pointing out these reports are often presented like false gospels. At the end of the day, even an alien cannot take away from the importance of faith in Christ.*

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

## A Tale of Two Hypotheses

It seems that almost everyone is interested in reports of UFOs and alien encounters. But how should these reports be understood? Where do these "unidentified flying objects" come from and what are they? Are intelligent beings visiting us from another planet or some other dimension? Or are UFO reports merely a collection of hoaxes, hallucinations, and misidentified phenomena? Can all UFO reports be adequately explained, or are there some that seem to defy all natural explanations? These are just a few of the questions we want to consider in this article.

First, however, it's essential to note that most UFOs (unidentified flying objects) become IFOs (identified flying objects). John Spencer, a British UFO researcher, estimates that as many as 95 percent of received UFO reports "are turned into IFOs and explained satisfactorily."{1} For example, the report might be found to have been a clever prank or to have some natural explanation. Planets, comets, military aircraft, and rockets (among many others) have all been mistaken for UFOs. But even if 99 percent of UFO reports could be satisfactorily explained, there would still be thousands of cases that stubbornly resist all natural explanations. These

are called *residual* UFO reports.

If residual UFOs are not hoaxes, hallucinations, or some natural or man-made phenomena, then what are they? Most UFO researchers hold either to the extraterrestrial hypothesis or the interdimensional hypothesis. The extraterrestrial hypothesis holds that technologically advanced, interplanetary space travelers are indeed visiting our planet from somewhere else in the cosmos. Stanton Friedman, a representative of this view, states clearly, "The evidence is overwhelming that some UFOs are alien spacecraft."{2}

The interdimensional hypothesis agrees "that some UFOs are real phenomena that may exhibit physical . . . effects."{3} However, unlike the extraterrestrial hypothesis, this view does not believe that UFOs and alien beings come from somewhere else in our physical universe. So where *do* they come from? Some suggest that they come from some other universe of space and time. But others believe that they come from some other dimension entirely, perhaps a spiritual realm.{4}

How might we tell which, if either, of these two hypotheses is correct? Astronomer and Christian apologist Dr. Hugh Ross suggests that we employ the scientific approach known as the "process of elimination." He writes, "Mechanics use it to find out why the car won't start. Doctors use it to find out why the stomach hurts. Detectives use it to find out who stole the cash. This process can also be used to discover what could, or could not, possibly give rise to UFO phenomena."{5}

So what happens if we apply this process to the extraterrestrial hypothesis? Although quite popular here in America, there are some serious scientific objections to this viewpoint.

## The Extraterrestrial Hypothesis

In the first place, it is highly improbable that there is

another planet in our cosmos capable of supporting physical life. Dr. Ross has calculated the probability of such a planet existing by natural processes alone as less than 1 in $10^{174}$. You actually have "a much higher probability of being killed in the next second by a failure in the second law of thermodynamics (about one chance in $10^{80}$)."{6} Thus, apart from the supernatural creation of another suitable place for life, our planet is almost certainly unique in its capacity to support complex biological organisms. (See the Probe article "Are We Alone in the Universe?") This alone makes the extraterrestrial hypothesis extremely improbable. But it gets even worse!

Suppose (against all statistical probability) that there *is* a planet with intelligent life elsewhere in the universe. What is the likelihood that such creatures are visiting our planet? And what sort of difficulties would they face in doing so?

Probably the greatest challenge to interstellar space travel is simply the immense size of the universe. One group of scientists, assuming that any alien spacecraft would likely maintain communication with either the home planet or with other members of their traveling party, "scanned all 202 of the roughly solar-type stars within 155 light-years of Earth. Not one intelligible signal was detected anywhere within the vicinity of these stars."{7} This implies that, at a minimum, E.T. would have to travel 155 light-years just to reach earth. Unfortunately, numerous galactic hazards would prevent traveling here in a straight line. Avoiding these deadly hazards would increase the minimum travel distance to approximately 230 light-years.{8}

Dr. Ross estimates that "any reasonably-sized spacecraft transporting intelligent physical beings can travel at velocities no greater than about 1 percent" of light-speed.{9} Although this is nearly 7 million miles per hour, it would still take about twenty-three thousand years to travel the 230

light-years to earth! Of course, a lot can go wrong in twenty-three thousand years. The aliens might run out of food or fuel. Their spacecraft might be damaged beyond repair by space debris. They might be destroyed by a contagious epidemic. The mind reels at the overwhelming improbability of successfully completing such a multi-generational mission.

In light of these facts, it doesn't appear that the extraterrestrial hypothesis can reasonably survive the process of elimination. Does the interdimensional hypothesis fare any better? A growing number of serious UFO researchers believe it can. Let's take a look.

## The Interdimensional Hypothesis

The interdimensional hypothesis holds that residual UFOs "enter the physical dimensions of the universe from 'outside' the four familiar dimensions of length, height, width, and time."{10} Where do they come from? Some believe that they come from another physical universe of space and time. But this does not seem possible. General relativity forbids "the space-time dimensions of any other hypothetically existing universe" from overlapping with our own.{11} For this reason, many researchers believe that residual UFOs must come from some other dimension entirely, perhaps even a spiritual realm.

What evidence can be offered for such a bold hypothesis? Many point to the strange behavior of residual UFOs themselves. Hugh Ross contends that residual UFOs "must be nonphysical because they disobey firmly established physical laws."{12} Among the many examples that he offers in support of this statement, consider the following:{13}

1. Residual UFOs generate no sonic booms when they break the sound barrier, nor do they show any evidence of meeting with air resistance.
2. They make impossibly sharp turns and sudden stops.
3. They send no detectable electromagnetic signals.

For example, “relative to the number of potential observers, ten times as many sightings occur at 3:00 A.M (a time when few people are out) as at either 6:00 A.M. or 8:00 P.M. (times when many people are outside in the dark).”{14} If residual UFOs were simply random events, then we would expect more sightings when there are more potential observers. The fact that these events are nonrandom may suggest some sort of intelligence behind them. This is further supported by the fact that some people are more likely to see a residual UFO than others. Numerous researchers have observed a correlation between an individual’s involvement with the occult and their likelihood of having a residual UFO encounter. This may also suggest some kind of intelligence behind these phenomena.

Finally, residual UFOs not only appear to be nonphysical and intelligent, they sometimes seem malevolent as well. Many of those claiming to have had a residual UFO encounter have suffered emotional, psychological, and/or physical injury. A few people have even died after such encounters. In light of these strange characteristics, many researchers have reached similar conclusions about the possible source of these phenomena.

## The Occult Connection

Many serious UFO investigators have noticed a striking similarity between some of the aliens described in UFO reports and the demonic spirits described in the Bible. Although it may not be possible to know whether some aliens are actually demons (and I certainly do not claim to know this myself), the well-documented connection between UFO phenomena and the occult cannot be denied.

In 1969 Lynn Catoe served as the senior bibliographer of a publication on UFOs researched by the Library of Congress for the U.S. Air Force Office of Scientific Research. After a two-year investigation, in which she surveyed thousands of documents, she drew explicit attention to the link between

UFOs and the occult. She wrote, “A large part of the available UFO literature . . . deals with subjects like mental telepathy, automatic writing and invisible entities . . . poltergeist manifestations and ‘possession.’ Many . . . UFO reports . . . recount alleged incidents that are strikingly similar to demonic possession and psychic phenomena.”{15} Veteran UFO researcher John Keel agrees. After surveying the literature on demonology he wrote, “The manifestations and occurrences described in this imposing literature are similar if not entirely identical to the UFO phenomenon itself.”{16} The bizarre claim of alien abduction may lend some credibility to these remarks.

Many (though not all) of those who report an abduction experience describe the aliens as deceptive and hostile. Whitley Strieber, whose occult involvement preceded the writing of both *Communion* and *Transformation*, at times explicitly referred to his alien visitors as “demons.” For example, in *Transformation* he described his emotional reaction to the aliens with these words: “I felt an absolutely indescribable sense of menace. It was hell on earth to be there, and yet I couldn’t move, couldn’t cry out, couldn’t get away . . . Whatever was there seemed so monstrously ugly, so filthy and dark and sinister. Of course they were demons. They had to be. And they were here and I couldn’t get away.”{17}

Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that abduction is often physically and emotionally painful, Mr. Strieber tends to believe that its purpose is ultimately benevolent. When integrated correctly, the abduction experience can provide a catalyst for spiritual growth and development. Still, he candidly admits that he is really not sure precisely *who* or *what* these beings actually are, and he continues to warn that many of them are indeed hostile and malevolent.{18} In light of this, one can’t help wondering about the experiences related in Mr. Strieber’s books. If his encounters with aliens were not merely hallucinatory, or due to some mental disorder,

isn’t it at least possible that his sinister visitors really were demons? As noted above, many UFO investigators would indeed consider this (or something very much like it) a genuine possibility.

## Another Gospel?

In his letter to the Galatians the Apostle Paul delivered a stirring indictment against every gospel but that of Christ. “But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed” (1:8-9). Evidently, the purity of the gospel was deeply important to Paul.

In today’s pluralistic society a variety of gospels are being preached. And among the great throng of voices clamoring for our attention are many UFO cults. Since the 1950s a number of these cults have arisen, often around a charismatic leader who claims to be in regular contact with otherworldly beings. Interestingly, unlike the abduction phenomenon, most contactees do not claim to have ever seen the aliens with whom they communicate. Rather, they claim that the aliens communicate with them psychically or telepathically. The contactee is simply a channel, or medium, through whom the aliens communicate their messages to humankind. This method of contact is rather intriguing for those who favor the interdimensional hypothesis. As John Saliba observes, “Many contactees . . . write about UFOs and space beings as if these were psychic phenomena, belonging to a different time/space dimension that lies beyond the scope . . . of modern science.”{19}

So what sort of messages do the aliens allegedly communicate to contactees? Often they want to help guide us to the next stage of our spiritual evolution or give us advice that will help us avoid some global catastrophe. Strangely, however,

many of them also want to deny or distort traditional doctrines of biblical Christianity. Oftentimes these denials and distortions concern the doctrine of Christ. For example, the Aetherius Society "views Jesus Christ as an advanced alien being . . . who communicates through a channel and travels to Earth in a flying saucer to protect Earth from evil forces."{20} As a general rule, "UFO religions . . . reject orthodox Christology (Jesus' identity as both God and man) and thus reject Jesus Christ as the . . . Creator and . . . Savior of humankind."{21}

A deficient Christology, combined with an acceptance of biblically forbidden occult practices like mediumistic channeling (see Lev. 19:31; Deut. 18:10-12; etc.), make many UFO cults spiritually dangerous. By preaching a false gospel, they have (perhaps unwittingly) placed themselves under a divine curse. By embracing occult practices, they have opened the door to potential demonic attack and deception. Nevertheless, there is hope for those involved with these cults. There is even hope for those tormented by hostile beings claiming to be aliens. The Bible tells us that through His work on the cross, Jesus disarmed the demonic rulers and authorities (Col. 2:15). What's more, for those who flee to Him for refuge, He makes available the "full armor of God," that they might "stand firm against the schemes of the devil" (Eph. 6:11). Regardless of *who* or *what* these alien beings might be, no one need live in fear of them. If Jesus has triumphed over the realm of evil demonic spirits, then certainly no alien can stand against Him. Let those who live in fear turn to Jesus, for He offers rest to all who are weary and heavy-laden (Matt. 11:28).

**Notes**

1. John Spencer, ed., *The UFO Encyclopedia* (New York: Avon Books, 1991), s.v. "identified flying objects (IFOs)," cited in Hugh Ross, Kenneth Samples, and Mark Clark, *Lights in the Sky & Little Green Men* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress,

2002), 25.
2. Jerome Clark, *The UFO Encyclopedia,* 2d ed., vol. 1 (Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1998), s.v. “Friedman, Stanton Terry,” cited in Ross, et al., *Lights in the Sky,* 31.
3. Ross, et al., 32.
4. Ibid., 109.
5. Ibid., 34.
6. Ibid., 39.
7. Ibid., 57.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 59.
10. Ibid., 109.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 69.
13. Ibid., 69-70.
14. Ibid., 116.
15. Lynn Catoe, *UFOs and Related Subjects: An Annotated Bibliography* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), p. iv (prepared under Air Force Office of Scientific Research Project Order 67-0002 and 68-0003), cited in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Facts on UFO’s and Other Supernatural Phenomena* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1992), 17.
16. John A. Keel, *UFOs: Operation Trojan Horse* (New York: Putnam’s, 1970), p. 215; cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *The Facts on UFO’s*, 18.
17. Whitley Strieber, *Transformation: The Breakthrough* (New York: Morrow, 1988), p. 181; cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *The Facts on UFO’s,* 23.
18. For example, his recent online journal entry, “How We Can Protect Ourselves,” (Aug. 28, 2003) at www.unknowncountry.com/journal/. 19. John A. Saliba, “Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena,” in *The Gods Have Landed,* ed. James R. Lewis (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 25; cited in Ross, et al., *Lights in the Sky,* 145.
20. Ross, et al., *Lights in the Sky,* 150.

21. Ibid., 164.

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# The Self-Understanding of Jesus

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn examines some sayings and deeds of Jesus, accepted by many critical scholars as historically authentic, to see what they imply about Jesus' self-understanding.*

## Jesus and the Scholars

You might be surprised to learn that today many New Testament scholars don't believe that the historical Jesus ever claimed to be the Son of God, the Lord, or even the Messiah.{1} But if that's the case, how do they explain the presence of such claims in the Gospels? They believe the Gospel writers put them there! The actual Jesus of history never made such exalted claims for *himself*. It was the early church that started all that business.



Is this true? What are we to make of all this? Let's begin with a deceptively simple question: How did the early church come to believe in—and even worship—Jesus as both Lord and Messiah, if he never actually claimed such titles for himself? Just think for a moment about how strange this would be. Jesus' earliest followers were Jews. They firmly believed that there is only one God. And yet, shortly after his

crucifixion, they began worshiping *Jesus* as God! As Dr. William Lane Craig asks, "How does one explain this worship by monotheistic Jews of one of their countrymen as God incarnate, apart from the claims of Jesus himself?"{2} In other words, if Jesus never made such exalted claims for *himself*, then why would his earliest followers do so? After all, on the surface such claims not only seem blasphemous, they also appear to contradict the deeply held Jewish conviction that there is only one God.

But there's another issue that needs to be considered. Although many critical scholars don't believe that Jesus ever made such radical personal claims, nevertheless, they *do* believe that he said and did things that seem to imply that he had a very high view of himself. In other words, while they might deny that Jesus ever *explicitly* claimed to be Israel's Messiah, or Lord, they acknowledge that he said and did things which, when you get right down to it, seem to imply that that's precisely who he *believed* himself to be! If this is correct, if Jesus really believed himself to be both Israel's Messiah and Lord, then notice that we are brought back once again to that old dilemma of traditional apologetics.{3} Jesus was either deceived in this belief, suffering from something akin to delusions of grandeur. Or he was a fraud, willfully trying to deceive others. Or he really was who he believed himself to be—Messiah, Lord, and Son of God.

In the remainder of this article, we'll examine some of the sayings and deeds of Jesus that even many critical scholars accept as historically authentic to see what they might tell us about Jesus' self-understanding.

## Jesus and the Twelve

Today, even most critical scholars agree that Jesus probably chose a core group of twelve disciples just as the Gospels say he did. In fact, Dr. Bart Ehrman refers to this event as "one

of the best-attested traditions of our surviving sources . . .”{4} Now you might be thinking that this sounds like a rather insignificant detail. What can this possibly tell us about the self-understanding of Jesus? Does his choice of twelve disciples give us any insight into what he believed about himself?

Let’s begin with a little background information. E. P. Sanders, in his highly acclaimed book, *Jesus and Judaism*, observes that “. . . in the first century Jewish hopes for the future would have included the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel.”{5} Now this hope was based on nothing less than God’s prophetic revelation in the Hebrew Bible. Sometimes the primary agent effecting this restoration is said to be the Lord (e.g. Isa. 11:11-12; Mic. 2:12). At other times it’s a Messianic figure who is clearly a human being (e.g. Isa. 49:5-6). Interestingly, however, still other passages describe this Messianic figure as having divine attributes, or as being closely associated with the Lord in some way (e.g. cp. Mic. 2:13 with 5:2-4). But why is this important? And what does it have to do with Jesus’ choice of twelve disciples?

Many New Testament scholars view Jesus’ choice of twelve disciples as symbolic of the promised restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel. The restoration of Israel is thus seen to be one of the goals or objectives of Jesus’ ministry. As Richard Horsley observes, “One of the principal indications that Jesus intended the restoration of Israel was his appointment of the Twelve.”{6} But if one of Jesus’ consciously chosen aims was the restoration of Israel, then what does this imply about who he believed himself to be? After all, the Old Testament prophets attribute this restoration either to the Lord or to a Messianic figure possessing both divine and human attributes.

Might Jesus have viewed himself in such exalted terms? Some scholars believe that he did. Dr. Ben Witherington poses an interesting question: “If the Twelve represent a renewed

Israel, where does Jesus fit in?" He's *not* one of the Twelve. "He's not just part of Israel, not merely part of the redeemed group, he's forming the group—just as God in the Old Testament formed his people and set up the twelve tribes of Israel."{7} Witherington argues that this is an important clue in uncovering what Jesus thought of himself. If he's right, then Jesus may indeed have thought of himself as Israel's Messiah and Lord!

## Jesus and the Law

What was Jesus' attitude toward the Law of Moses? Some scholars say that Jesus was a law-abiding Jew who "broke neither with the written Law nor with the traditions of the Pharisees."{8} Others say the issue is more complex. Ben Witherington observes that Jesus related to the Law in a variety of ways.{9} Sometimes he affirmed the validity of particular Mosaic commandments (e.g. Matt. 19:18-19). At other times he went beyond Moses and intensified some of the commandments. In the Sermon on the Mount he declared, "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27-28). We shouldn't skip too lightly over a statement like this. The prohibition against adultery is one of the Ten Commandments. By wording the statement as he did, Jesus apparently "equated his own authority with that of the divinely given Torah."{10} Indeed, it's because of sayings like this that one Jewish writer complained: "Israel cannot accept . . . the utterances of a man who speaks in his own name—not 'thus saith the Lord,' but '*I* say unto you.' This 'I' is . . . sufficient to drive Judaism away from the Gentiles forever."{11}

But Jesus went further than this! In Mark 7 he declared all foods "clean" (vv. 14-19). That is, he set aside the dietary laws found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. To really grasp the

radical nature of Jesus' declaration one must only remember that these dietary laws had been given to Israel by God Himself! But what sort of person believes he has the authority to set aside the commandments of God? Ben Witherington notes, "Jesus seems to assume an authority over Torah that no Pharisee or Old Testament prophet assumed—the authority to set it aside."{12} And Jacob Neusner, a Jewish scholar, seems to agree: "Jews believe in the Torah of Moses . . . and that belief requires faithful Jews to enter a dissent at the teachings of Jesus, on the grounds that those teachings at important points contradict the Torah."{13}

How does this relate to the self-understanding of Jesus? Think about it this way. What would Jesus have to believe about himself to seriously think he had the authority to set aside God's commandments? Although it may trouble some critical scholars, the evidence seems to favor the view that Jesus believed that in some sense he possessed the authority of God Himself!

## Jesus and the Demons

One of the amazing feats attributed to Jesus in the Gospels is the power of exorcism, the power to cast out demons from human beings. Although this may sound strange and unscientific to some modern readers, most critical scholars agree that both Jesus and his contemporaries at least *believed* that Jesus had such power. Of course, this doesn't mean that the majority of critical scholars believe that demons *actually* exist, or that Jesus *actually* cast such spirits out of people. Many of them do not. But they do think there is persuasive historical evidence for affirming that both Jesus and his contemporaries *believed* such things.{14} In fact, Dr. Bart Ehrman notes that "Jesus' exorcisms are among the best-attested deeds of the Gospel traditions."{15} But why is this important? And what can it possibly tell us about Jesus' self-understanding?

Most scholars are convinced that the historical Jesus declared, “But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt. 12:28). Prior to making this declaration, the Pharisees had accused Jesus of casting out demons “by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons” (12:24). Jesus responded by pointing out how absurd it would be for Satan to fight against himself like that (v. 26). What’s more, the charge was inconsistent. There were other Jewish exorcists in Jesus’ day and it was widely believed that their power came from God. Wouldn’t it be more reasonable, then, to conclude that Jesus’ power also came from God?

If so, then notice the startling implications of Jesus’ claim: “*If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you*.” At the very least, Jesus appears to be claiming that in himself the kingdom of God is in some sense a present reality. But his claim may actually be even more radical. Some scholars have observed that in ancient Jewish literature the phrase, ‘kingdom of God,’ is sometimes used as a roundabout way for speaking of God Himself. If Jesus intended this meaning in the statement we are considering, then William Lane Craig’s conclusion is fully warranted: “In claiming that in himself the kingdom of God had already arrived, as visibly demonstrated by his exorcisms, Jesus was, in effect, saying that in himself God had drawn near, thus putting himself in God’s place.”{16}

It increasingly appears that Jesus thought of himself as much more than just another teacher or prophet. Even when we limit ourselves to material accepted as authentic by the majority of critical scholars, Jesus still seems to unquestionably communicate his divinity!

## Jesus and the Father

In one of the most astonishing declarations of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel he states, “All things have been handed over

to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son, except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (11:27). Many scholars believe that this verse forms a unit with the two preceding verses. It's clear from the context that the "Father" referred to by Jesus is God, for Jesus begins this section by saying, "I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth" (11:25). So in the verse we are considering, Jesus claims to be God's Son in an absolutely unique sense. He refers to God as "My Father," and declares that no one knows the Father, "except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him." Jesus not only claims to be God's unique Son, he also claims to have special knowledge of the Father that no one else can mediate to others!

Because of the radical nature of these claims, it's hardly surprising to learn that some critical scholars have denied that Jesus ever really said this. Nevertheless, other scholars have offered some very good reasons for embracing the saying's authenticity. Dr. William Lane Craig notes that this saying comes from the hypothetical *Q* source, a source that both Matthew and Luke may have used in writing their Gospels. If that's true, then the saying is quite early and thus has a greater likelihood of actually going back to Jesus. Additionally, "the idea of the mutual knowledge of Father and Son is a Jewish idea, indicating its origin in a Semitic-speaking milieu."{17} Finally, Dr. Ben Witherington notes that the eminent New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias showed "how this saying goes back to an Aramaic original" which "surely counts in favor of it going back to Jesus."{18} Aramaic was probably the language most often used by Jesus and his disciples. After discussing this saying in some detail, Witherington concludes, "In the end, all the traditional bases for judging this saying to be inauthentic no longer will bear close scrutiny."{19}

In this brief overview of the self-understanding of Jesus,

I've attempted to show that even when we limit ourselves to Gospel traditions that are generally considered historically authentic by a majority of scholars, Jesus still makes impressive claims to deity. But as Dr. Craig observes, ". . . if Jesus was not who he claimed to be, then he was either a charlatan or a madman, neither of which is plausible. Therefore, why not accept him as the divine Son of God, just as the earliest Christians did?"{20}

Notes

1. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 242-43.
2. Ibid., 243.
3. Ibid., 252.
4. Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 186.
5. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 98.
6. Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 199.
7. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 134.
8. Donald A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus: An Analysis and Critique of Modern Jewish Study of Jesus*, ed. Gerard Terpstra (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 109-10. This quotation does not represent Hagner's own position.
9. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 65.
10. Craig, 246.
11. Ahad ha' Am, "Judaism and the Gospels," in *Nationalism and the Jewish Ethic,* ed. H. Khon (New York: Schocken, 1962), 298, cited in Hagner, 101-02.
12. Witherington, 65.
13. Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (New York: Doubleday,

1993), xii, cited in Craig, 247.
14. Ehrman, 197.
15. Ibid.
16. Craig, 249.
17. Ibid., 246.
18. Witherington, 224.
19. Ibid., 225.
20. Craig, 252.

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# The Scandal of Blood Atonement: "Why All the Blood and Cross-Talk, Christian?"

*The story of Jesus' death and resurrection raises accusations that Christianity is obsessed with blood. Many believers struggle with this too. Byron Barlowe explores the biblical reasons for the focus on Christ's blood and why its shedding was necessary.*

## The Bloody Cross: A Tough Thing to Handle



*Easter season is all about the death and resurrection of Christ—which centers on the blood sacrifice He endured. Christianity is called a bloody religion, focusing on the execution of Jesus Christ on a cross. Why is this true and what does it mean when we say His blood atones for our sin?*

Millions of Americans—and billions of Christians around the world—celebrated the death and Resurrection of Christ during

Passion Week and Easter Sunday. The topic was everywhere from sermons to a CNN docudrama titled *Finding Jesus: Faith, Fact, Forgery.*

You may have questions about all the talk of "the blood of Christ" and songs saying things like "Jesus's blood washed away my sins." This bloody theme does raise understandable concerns that are shared by believers, seekers and skeptics alike.

In fact, more and more skeptics are posting on the Internet things like this book promotion:

> "Christians are obsessed with blood! They sing about it, declare they are washed in it and even drink it! In this book you will discover the crazy background to this Christian obsession and the truth about the bloodthirsty God they claim to know and serve."{1}

In this article, we'll discuss whether these charges are true and fair and explain the doctrine of blood atonement.

Again, even many Christians—including me—have wondered deeply about all the biblical imagery of shed blood, what some call the Crimson Thread of Scripture. I mean the grotesqueness of Old Testament animal sacrifice and the belief in Jesus's torturous slaying as the core of salvation. Radical stuff for modern ears.

So what is blood atonement and why does it matter? In historic orthodox Christian thought, God's Son is at the very center of history doing these things:

- reconciling man to God,

- ransoming humans from slavery to sin and well-deserved death and

- justly recompensing God for the horrific offense of rebellion and disobedience to Him.

Thankfully, the gospel (or good news) is simple. The Bible claims, “Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.”{2}

The bottom line for all people is this: out of Christ’s death came the hope of eternal life—and His resurrection proved this. Our sin caused God’s Son to suffer and die. By grace, through faith, we can benefit. Otherwise, we suffer eternally for staying with the cosmic rebellion that started in a perfect Garden long ago.

Yet, this blood-centered good news is a scandal to both those who believe and those who deny it. In fact, the Greek root word *skandalon* is used for Christ Himself.{3} You see, Jews denied Christ as the Promised One and Gentiles thought it was all nonsense. Nothing has changed for mankind: the choices are either do-it-yourself religion, being too smart for all that, or believing in this radical hope.

## The Reason Someone Had to Die

*Why did anybody have to die? God’s justice and holiness demands a death penalty for the sinner.*

We are all in a serious spiritual and moral pickle. Biblical Christianity declares that each person ever born is stuck under an irreversible “***sin***drome” for which there is no human answer. History sadly records the habitual and continual effects of sin: oppression, addictions, self-promoting power plays, deceit, war, on and on.

Now for a reality check: no moral order, either in a family, a company, military unit or society survives ambiguity or failure to enforce laws. Just ask the victims of unpunished criminals set loose to perpetrate again. If the Creator were to simply wink at sin or let people off scot-free, where would justice be? What kind of God would He be?

God is holy and He called Himself the Truth. There is no way God would be true to Himself and the moral order He created and yet fail to punish sin. Such impunity would mock justice. As one theologian puts it, “Pardon without atonement nullifies justice . . . A law without penalty is morally unserious, even dangerous.”

Ok, but penalties have levels of harshness. Why is death necessary? Scripture spells out clearly the decree that sinners must die. In God’s original command He stated, “When you eat of [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17). In Ezekiel the same formula appears slightly reworded: “The soul who sins is the one who will die” (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). Paul boiled it down this way: “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

God’s justice and holiness demand death for sin. Blood must be shed. Detractors of the cross tend to underestimate sin and know nothing of its offense to a holy God. Everyone wants justice—for others.

Ok, so what does a just and holy God do with impure, treasonous creatures He made to bear His image? God was in a quandary, if you will.

Yet, even in the Garden, He was already hinting at a plan to reconcile this dilemma. “God so loved the world” that he sent down His own Son as a man to pay the death penalty.{4}

Thomas Oden writes, “God’s holiness made a penalty for sin necessary . . . Love was the divine motive; holiness [was] the divine requirement. [Romans 5:8 reads] ‘God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us’. [And as Romans 8 teaches,] This love was so great that God ‘did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all’ (Romans 8:32).”{5}

# Christ's Death and Resurrection Was Unlike Other Religious Stories: It Was All for Love

*God's morally just demand for a death-payment is not the same as pagan gods, who maliciously demanded sacrifices. True for one big reason:*

Isn't this crucifixion thing simply about a grouchy god acting all bloodthirsty, as some atheists like popular author Richard Dawkins say? Should good people find this repugnant? One unbelieving critic wrote,

> "Unfortunately, much of Christian art consists of depicting the sufferings and agony of Jesus on the Cross. This reflects the obsession of Christianity with the Crucifixion . . . "Crosstianity" [in the contemptuous words of one skeptic]. The obsession with 'our sins' having been 'washed away by the Blood of the Lamb' would be regarded as evidence of a serious mental illness . . . but when this is an obsession of millions of people it becomes 'religious faith'."{6}

Wow! Did you know that you, if you are a believer, are part of an insane global crowd? This vividly illustrates the scandal of the cross: "which is to them that are perishing foolishness" as the Apostle Paul described it.{7}

No, biblical sacrifice is not a bloodfest, but the way to deal with a sad reality. Put it this way: If God said, "Nah, don't worry about rebelling against your Creator," would that be a just and righteous God? Would a deity who fails to punish wrongdoing be worth following? Would His laws mean anything? Yet, we are unable to keep laws, so He steps in to pay that penalty. With His lifeblood. This storyline is utterly unique in the long human history of religions. And the resurrection Christians celebrate shows its truth in actual time and on

this dirty earth.

Pagan myths of savior gods who rise from the dead have only a surface resemblance to the biblical resurrection. Such deities are more like impetuous and tyrannical people than the one and only Yahweh. The biblical God's love fostered the unthinkable: set up a sacrificial system for a one-of-a-kind people—the Israelites—that served as a foretelling of His *coup de grace*: dying in man's place as the spotless sacrificial Lamb. What a novel religious idea that only the true God could dream up! Theologian Thomas Oden says it this way: "It was God who was both offering reconciliation and receiving the reconciled."{8}

God's merging of perfect holiness, just retributive punishment and allowance of His Son's execution was actually a beautiful thing. Francis of Assisi wrote that "love and faithfulness meet together [at the cross]; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven."{9}

## But Why a Violent, Bloody Death?

*I get that death was demanded of someone to pay for sin. So why a bloody suffering and execution? Why the constant shedding of blood?*

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* hit movie theaters in 2004 to mixed reviews. It earned its R-rating for gory bloodshed and, ironically, became a cultural scandal itself. Seems that the bloody realism was too much for both soft-core Christians and high-minded unbelievers. But this vividly poignant portrayal of Christ's blood-stained Passion did raise a good question.

When it came to saving mankind, why the shedding of blood? Could God not have found another way? Church Father Athanasius believed that, if there were a better way to preserve human free will and still reconcile rebellious man to a holy God, He

would have used it. Apparently, Christ's suffering and death was the only solution.

The Apostle Paul summarized Christ's entire earthly ministry this way: He "humbled Himself and became obedient unto death" (Philippians 2:8). At the cross, "human hate did all the damage it could do to the only Son of God."{10} God used the realities available to Him, including the masterfully grim method of crucifixion, honed to a fine art by Roman pagans who viewed human life as dispensable.

*Again, why is death demanded of God to atone for sin?* The grounding for such a claim appears early in the Bible, after the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. In Genesis 9 Yahweh declares, "I will require a reckoning . . . for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in His own image."{11} Apparently, God has put the price of a man's life as that of another's life.

The highlight of Christ's death was its substitutionary sense. The Apostle Peter wrote, "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit."{12} Justice, fairness, reality itself demanded a bloodguilt payment for sin. Christ paid it.

Substitutionary sacrifice was nothing new for the Jews who unwittingly had the Messiah crucified. From the beginning of God's dealings with His people, agreements were blood covenants. What else could carry the weight of such momentous things? And, as the book of Hebrews teaches, **"**Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and ***without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.***"{13}

One theologian plainly said, "Through this sacrificial system, the people of Israel were being prepared for the incomparable act of sacrifice that was to come in Jesus Christ."{14}

His suffering, death and resurrection conquered sin and

neutered the fear of death. Only blood could clean sin; only God's Son's blood could do it perfectly and forever.

Here's the scandal we spoke of: only a perfect sacrifice would do for washing mankind's sins away and reconciling us back to God.

## Beautiful Obsession: God Was Glad to Allow This Brutality for Us!

*God said it was His pleasure to pay the death penalty* with His own self*, in the Person of His son. Christianity's so-called blood-obsession is a beautiful picture of perfect divine love.*

Theologian Thomas Oden summarized well our discussion of Christ's blood atonement. He wrote, "Love was the divine motive; holiness the divine requirement. 'God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8)."

Such claims trump the understandable disgust of doubters. But the red blood leads to clean white.

Chick-fil-A restaurant employees are trained to say, "My pleasure" when serving customers. Imagine God saying that to believers regarding the cross of Christ! Paul explains in his letter to the Colossian church that "it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness of deity to dwell in Him . . . having made peace *through the blood* of His cross . . . He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death . . ."{15}

God was glad to stand in as the essential scapegoat to restore us to right relations with Himself, to buy us back from slavery to sin, fear and death, and to abolish sin and its effects. This doesn't sound like a bloodthirsty tyrannical deity demanding a whipping boy or abusing his own child, as some acidly accuse. "My pleasure" brings in new dimensions of

lovingkindness and servant-heartedness.

But wait, there's more! Scripture lists lots of wonderful effects created by the blood of Christ. These include forgiveness, propitiation or satisfaction of God's righteous wrath, justification or being made right, reconciliation with God, cleansing, sanctification, freedom from sin, and the conquest of Satan.

Yes, you could say that Christianity is blood-obsessed. As accused, even its hymns often focus on the benefits bought at the highest of prices: the life of the God-Man Himself. One famous hymn goes:

> For my pardon, this I see,
> Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
> For my cleansing this my plea,
> Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

This beautiful blood obsession finds its highest hope in Revelation. The following is a prophecy about persecuted believers:

> "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have *washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb* . . . For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."{16}

Maybe the revelations here are as crazy as skeptics say. The foolishness of God. We believe they are the most glorious story ever told.

Notes

1. Promotion at Amazon.com for *Obsessed with Blood: The Crazy Things Christians Believe*, Book 1, by Ex-Preacher.
2. 1 Peter 3:18, NASB.

3. Romans 9:33, 1 Corinthians 1:23, 1 Peter 2:8.
4. John 3:16.
5. Oden, Thomas, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 405.
6. Meyer, Peter, "Why I Am Not a Christian". Serendipity blog. Accessed 2-27-17, www.serendipity.li/eden/why_i_am_not_a_christian.htm.
7. 1 Corinthians 1:18.
8. Ibid., 414.
9. Ibid., 405.
10. Ibid., 389.
11. Genesis 9:4-6.
12. 1 Peter 3:18.
13. Hebrews 9:22-23, emphasis mine.
14. Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 413-414.
15. Colossians 1:19.
16. Revelation 7:14b-17, emphasis mine.

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# Christ and the Human Condition

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn looks at how God has acted in Christ to address those things which ail us most: sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God.*



Early in the book of Job, Eliphaz the Temanite declares that "man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward"

(5:7). Whether it's the trouble that befalls us as we're simply minding our own business or the trouble we bring upon others (or even ourselves), difficulties, sin, and suffering seem to plague us wherever we turn. Just think for a moment about some of the natural evils which afflict the human race. This class of evils includes both natural disasters like hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes, and earthquakes, and diseases like cancer, leukemia, Alzheimer's and ALS. While natural evils are bad enough, they are only part of the problem. In addition to these, we must also consider all the moral evils which human beings commit against God, one another, and themselves. This second class of evils includes things like hatred, blasphemy, murder, rape, child abuse, terrorism, and suicide. Taken together, the scope and magnitude of human sin and suffering in the world are truly mind-boggling. What does God have to say about issues such as these? Even better, what (if anything) has He done about them?

The Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga has written

> As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, cooly observing the suffering of His creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering. He endures the anguish of seeing his son, the second person of the Trinity, consigned to the bitterly cruel and shameful death of the cross. Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. Christ was prepared to endure the agonies of hell itself; and God, the Lord of the universe, was prepared to endure the suffering consequent upon his son's humiliation and death. He was prepared to accept this suffering in order to overcome sin, and death, and the evils that afflict our world, and to confer on us a life more glorious than we can imagine.{1}

According to Plantinga, then, God *has acted*, and acted

decisively through His Son, to address those things which ail us most—sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God. In what follows, we will briefly examine each of these ailments. More importantly, however, we will also see how God has acted in Christ to heal our bleak condition, thereby giving us encouragement, strength and hope, both now and forevermore.

## Moral Evil

When Adam and Eve first sinned in the garden (Gen. 3:6), they could hardly have imagined all the tragic consequences that would follow this single act of disobedience. Through this act, sin and death entered the world and the human condition was radically altered (Rom. 5:12-19). Human nature had become defiled with sin and this sinful nature was bequeathed to all mankind. The human race was now morally corrupt, alienated from God and one another, subject to physical death, and under the wrath of God. The entire creation, originally pronounced "very good" by God (Gen. 1:31), was negatively affected by this first act of rebellion. Like the ripples that radiate outward when a stone is thrown into a calm body of water, the consequences of that first sin have rippled through history, bringing evil, pain, and suffering in their wake. As the Christian philosopher William Lane Craig has noted, "The terrible human evils in the world are testimony to man's depravity in his state of spiritual alienation from God."{2} Indeed, we are so hopelessly entangled in this web of sin and disobedience that we cannot possibly extricate ourselves. This, according to the Bible, is the sorry plight in which all men naturally find themselves.

Fortunately for us, however, God has acted to free us from our enslavement to sin, to disentangle us from the web that holds us captive, and to reconcile us to Himself. He did this by sending His Son to so thoroughly identify with us in our painful predicament that He actually *became* one of us. By

identifying Himself with sinners who were under the wrath of God, He was able to take our sins upon Himself and endure God's wrath in our place, so that we might be reconciled to God by placing our trust in Him. The apostle Paul put it this way: God made Christ "who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, we're told that anyone hanged on a tree because of their sins is "accursed of God" (21:23). In the New Testament, Paul picks up on this idea and says that through His substitutionary death on the cross, Christ became "a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). We should not lose sight of the significance of these words. By identifying Himself with the guilty human race, and becoming a curse for us, He has opened the way for us to be freed from our sins and reconciled to God as *we* are identified with *Him* through faith. This is just one of the ways in which Christ has met the desperate needs of the human condition.

## Natural Evil

Another reason why we suffer arises from what philosophers and theologians call *natural evil*. Natural evil refers to all the causes of human pain and suffering which are not brought about by morally-responsible agents. This would include the pain and suffering arising from natural disasters like earthquakes, famines, and storms, as well as diseases like cancer and ALS.

Now the question I want to pose is this: Is there a sense in which Christ is also a solution to the problem of natural evil? And if so, then how should we understand this? When we examine the life and ministry of Jesus as it's recorded in the Gospels, we can hardly help but be struck by the number of miracles He performs. He walks on water, calms raging storms, feeds thousands of people with a few loaves and fish, cleanses lepers, heals the sick, restores sight to the blind, and even

raises the dead! Although some might demur at all these accounts of miracles, Craig has noted that "the miracle stories are so widely represented in all strata of the Gospel traditions that it would be fatuous to regard them as not rooted in the life of Jesus."{3}

So what is the significance of Jesus' miracles? According to New Testament scholar Ben Witherington, Jesus' miracles show him to be God's special agent of blessing, healing, liberation, and salvation, as well as the "one who brings about the conditions associated with the final . . . dominion of God."{4} Since the kingdom of God is portrayed in Scripture as a reign of peace, prosperity, health, well-being and blessing, Jesus' miracles of healing, as well as his demonstrations of power over nature, indicate that He is indeed capable of ushering in such a wonderful kingdom.{5} And if Jesus has the power to bring in an era of health and well-being, both for our physical bodies and for the physical universe, and if he in fact will do so, then he clearly provides a solution to the problem of natural evil. Ultimately, in the new heaven and new earth, which God will give to those who love Him, we are promised that there "will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

## Physical Death

The apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, described death as an "enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26). People fear death for any number of reasons. Some fear that the process of dying will be painful. Others dread the thought of leaving behind the ones they love. Some may fear that death is simply the end, that whatever joys and pleasures this life holds, death takes them away forever. But others may fear that there *is* an afterlife and worry that things may not go well for them there. For many people, however, death is feared as the great unknown.{6} Friends and relatives die and we never see or hear

from them again. For these people, death is like the ultimate black-hole, from which nothing and no one can ever escape.

But according to the Bible, Christ *did* escape the snares of death, and in doing so He dealt our mortal enemy a mortal blow of his own. I said that Paul describes death as an "enemy," but this is simply to inform us of the fact that our enemy has been conquered by Christ. "The last enemy that will be abolished," he writes, "is death" (1 Cor. 15:26). But how has Christ conquered this enemy? And how does *His* victory help *us*?

Christ conquered death through his resurrection from the dead and all who put their trust in Him can share in his victory. Pastor Erwin Lutzer has written:

> Thus the resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Standing at the empty tomb, we are assured of the triumph of Jesus on the Cross; we are also assured that He has conquered our most fearsome enemy. Yes, death can still terrify us, but the more we know about Jesus, the more its power fades.{7}

Consider the life and death of the great Reformation theologian Martin Luther. As a young Augustinian monk, Luther struggled with a very sensitive conscience and a terrible fear of death. But once he understood the gospel and placed his trust in Christ, his fear gradually began to fade. By the time he died, his fear was gone. It's reported that on his deathbed, he recited some promises from the Bible, commended his spirit to God, and quietly breathed his last.{8} Believing that Christ had conquered death and given him eternal life, he was able to die at peace and without any fear. And this is the hope of *all* who trust in Christ!

## The Weight of Glory

Christian theologians sometimes describe the knowledge of God as "an incommensurable good."{9} By this they mean that

knowing God in an intimate, personal way is quite literally the *greatest good* that any created being can experience. It is an "incommensurable" or "immeasurable" good—a good so great that it surpasses our ability even to comprehend. The apostle Paul once prayed that the Ephesians might "know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge" (Eph. 3:19). He understood that "intimate relationship with God . . . is incommensurately good-for created persons."{10}

Of course, this doesn't mean that one who is intimately related to God will never experience any of the trials and difficulties of life. In fact, it's possible that such a person will actually experience *more* trials and difficulties than would have been the case had they *not* been intimately related to God! Knowing the love of Christ doesn't make one immune to suffering. It does, however, provide indescribable comfort while going through it (see 2 Cor. 1:3-5).

The apostle Paul understood this quite well. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he described himself as a servant of God who had suffered afflictions, hardships, beatings, imprisonments, labors, sleeplessness, and hunger (2 Cor. 6:4-5). In spite of this, however, he did not lose heart. He famously wrote that "momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

But how could Paul describe his sufferings as just a "momentary, light affliction"? Because, says Craig, he had an *eternal* perspective. "He understood that the length of this life, being finite, is literally infinitesimal in comparison with the eternal life we shall spend with God."{11}

The greatest hunger of the human heart is to know and experience the love and acceptance of God and to enjoy Him forever. In his magnificent sermon "The Weight of Glory," C.S. Lewis wrote, "In the end that Face which is the delight or . . . terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either

with one expression or . . . the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be . . . disguised."{12} Incredibly, just as Christ has dealt with the problems of sin, suffering, and death, He has also acted decisively to reconcile us to God. Through faith in him, anyone who wants can eventually experience "an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

**Notes**

2. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 96-97.
3. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 324.
4. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 43-44.
5. Some biblical passages that pertain to Christ's coming kingdom are Isaiah 11:1-9, Matthew 19:28, and Acts 3:19-21.
6. I was reminded of many of these examples while watching the round table discussion on suffering and death in Catherine Tatge, "The Question of God: Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis" (U.S.A.: PBS Home Video, 2004).
7. Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Vanishing Power of Death* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), 13.
8. Mike Fearon, *Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1986), 157-58.
9. See, for example, Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 100.
10. Marilyn McCord Adams, Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 47.
11. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 99.
12. C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 13.

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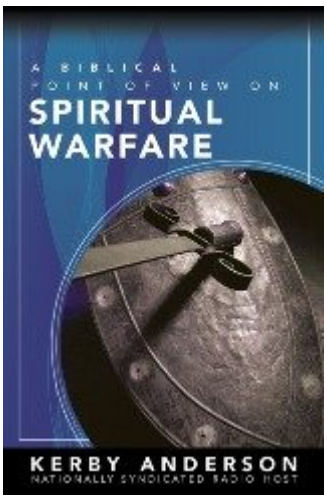
# Spiritual Warfare – Applying A Biblical Worldview Perspective



*Kerby Anderson provides a concise, biblical worldview perspective on the important topic of spiritual warfare. Every Christian needs to understand that our battle is against spiritual forces not against other humans, who need Christ. He gives us practical advice on understanding our spiritual weapons and applying them to take on the forces of Satan in this world.*

## Spiritual Warfare

Lots of books have been written about spiritual warfare. Most of them share anecdotes and experiences of the authors or the people they to whom they have ministered. In this article I merely want to answer the question, what is a biblical point of view on spiritual warfare? (For more information on this topic, see Kerby Anderson, *A Biblical Point of View on Spiritual Warfare* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2009).




Spiritual warfare affects everyone. In fact, the day someone becomes a Christian, they are already involved in spiritual warfare. There is no place you can escape from

this warfare. There are no “safe zones” or “secure bunkers” where you can hide.

Sadly, many Christians do not even know there is a spiritual war taking place around them. They may even become a spiritual casualty and never understand what has happened to them.

So many Christians have become mortally wounded in the spiritual conflict that takes place around them. They may be so emotionally spent or spiritually dead that they are essentially no longer of any use to God.

Others may have less serious wounds from this spiritual conflict, but are still affected by the battle. They still go about the Christian life but are not as effective as they could be because of the “battle scars” they carry with them.

Jesus never promised that the Christian life would be easy. In fact, He actually warned us of the opposite. He says in John 16:33 that “in this world you will have trouble.”

Anyone who takes even a brief look at the history of Christianity knows that is true. Jesus was beaten and crucified. Most of the disciples died martyrs deaths. Millions of Christians were persecuted throughout history.

Christians today suffer persecution in many lands, and all of us wake up to a spiritual battle every day. That is why we need to be prepared for battle.

So where does this battle take place? Actually the Bible teaches that spiritual warfare takes place in various places in heaven and on earth.

First, we should remember that God dwells above in the heavens. Psalm 8:1 says that God has displayed His splendor above the heavens. Psalm 108:4-5 says God’s lovingkindness is great above the heavens and that He is exalted above the heavens.

The Bible also talks about the battle in the heavens. When a passage in Scripture talks about heaven, it may be referring to one of three places: (1) The first heaven is what we would call the atmosphere, (2) The second heaven is where the angels fly and do battle (Revelation 12:4-12; 14:6-7), and (3) the third heaven is also called "Paradise" and is what Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 12: 2-4:

> I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.

Spiritual warfare also takes place below the heavens and on earth. This occurs on the face of the earth (Genesis 6:1; Acts 17:26) where Satan prowls like a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8). And it will also take place in hell and the bottomless pit (Revelation 9:1-2; 20:1-3) and at the Lake of Fire (Revelation 19:20; 20:10-15) where final judgment will take place.

## Spiritual Battles

Spiritual warfare is the spiritual battle that takes place in the unseen, supernatural dimension. Although it is unseen by humans, we can certainly feel its effects. And we are to battle against spiritual forces in a number of ways.

First, we need to realize that the weapons of this warfare are not human weapons fought in the flesh. Instead, they are spiritual weapons such as truth and righteousness that can tear down strongholds and philosophies that are in opposition to God.

> For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of

> the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

Second, the nature of this battle is different from an earthly battle. In Ephesians 6:12, Paul talks about the nature of this spiritual battle: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness of this world, against spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places.”

We can also have confidence because God “rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13).

Many Christians do not like the warfare imagery in the Bible, but that is how the spiritual life is described. We need to prepare for this spiritual battle even if we would like to ignore the battle for truth and error as well as the battle for life and death that is taking place around us.

Third, the Bible tells us that to prepare for battle. We must wear the right armor and have the right weapons, which include truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation, and prayer:

> Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith, with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit (Ephesians 6:14-18a).

The Bible also calls upon us to be strong in the Lord. We should be steadfast in our resistance to the Devil. We do this by putting on the whole armor of God and resisting Satan. Ephesians 6:10-11 says, “Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.”

## The Three Ws

One way to understand the nature of spiritual warfare is to consider the three Ws: our walk, our weapons, and our warfare.

First let’s consider our walk. Paul says, “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh” (2 Corinthians 10:3). Our war is not an earthly one but a spiritual one. So even though we do walk in the flesh, our warfare is not fleshly.

We should understand that we didn’t start this war but it has been going on long before we came on the scene. For a war to exist, there must be threat from those intend to harm others.

For the battle to be successful, those who are threatened must be willing to stand up and fight. Many wars have been lost because good people refused to fight. And many Christians believe that the reason Satan has been so successful in the world is because either (1) Christians have been unwilling to fight, or (2) Christians have not even been aware that there is a spiritual battle.

The second W is our weapons. Paul also teaches, “for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses” (2 Corinthians 10:4). One of the most important weapons of our warfare is the Word of God. Paul calls it the “Sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17).

We are also instructed to wear armor before we go into battle (Ephesians 6). We are to gird our loins with truth (vs. 14a). That means we need to define the truth, defend the truth, and spread the truth. We are also to wear the breastplate of righteousness (vs. 14b). That means we are to rely on the righteousness of Jesus and live holy and righteous lives. We are also to take up the shield of faith (vs. 16). When we have bold faith, we are able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of Satan. And we are to take the helmet of salvation (vs. 17). We need to be assured of our salvation and stand firm in that assurance.

The third W is our warfare. What is the goal of spiritual warfare? Paul says, “We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). We cannot fight this war with physical weapons because our targets are not physical. They are intellectual and spiritual. So we cannot fight them with guns or planes or bombs.

The word “speculations” (which is sometimes translated “imaginations”) refers to the mind. It includes our thoughts and our reflections. So we should challenge the false ideas that Satan has encouraged in the world by countering unbiblical speculations and proclaiming God’s truth.

## The World, the Flesh, and the Devil

How does spiritual warfare affect us?

When the New Testament uses the term “world,” most of the time it is a translation from the word *kosmos*. Sometimes it can mean simply the planet earth (John 1:10; Acts 17:24). But when we talk about the influence of the world on our spiritual life and on our souls, we are talking about the worldly system in which we live. This world system involves culture and

philosophy that is ultimately in opposition to God. That doesn't mean that everyone is evil or that the world's system is filled with nothing but error. But it does mean that the world can have a negative influence on our souls.

Paul warns not to be conformed to this world (Romans 12:1). He also warns us not to let our hearts and minds be taken captive to these false ideas: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ" (Colossians 2:8).

The Bible teaches that many temptations come from the world's system. We read in 1 John 2:15-16, "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world."

The second influence is the flesh. Like our previous term, the word flesh can have different meanings. Sometimes it merely refers to our body: our flesh and bones (Luke 24:39; Acts 2:26). In this context, however, flesh is a second area of temptation and thus an important instrument of sin. We see this in the fact that we are born with a sin nature (Romans 7:14-24; 8:5-9). It is part of our bodies (Romans 7:25; 1 John 1:8-10) even after we have accepted Jesus Christ. But the good news is that its power over us has been broken (Romans 6:1-14) so that we can have victory over sin (Romans 8:1-4).

A third influence is the Devil. The ruler and mastermind behind the world's system is Satan. He can use the various distractions of the world's system to draw us into sin, temptation, and worldliness. We read in 1 John 2:15 that "If any one loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." So the Devil can use the world to turn our affections from God to the world.

Satan can also attack us through our flesh. He can entice our flesh with various temptations. We read in 1 John 2:16 that “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.” He can draw our attention away from God by manipulating the desires of the flesh.

## Spiritual Weapons

The weapons of our warfare are spiritual because the battle we are fighting is spiritual. Paul clearly states this in Ephesians 6:12: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.” This is a spiritual battle that takes place in the heavenly places.

We should also realize that we are not warring against flesh and blood but against a spiritual enemy. So even though we might be tempted to think that people are our real enemy, our real enemy is Satan and his demons. People are merely pawns in the heavenly chess game being played out in our lives and in our world.

Paul tells us that “though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses” (2 Corinthians 10:3-4). So what are those weapons? It is interesting that Paul does not give a list to those who he is writing to in the church in Corinth. Therefore, we must assume that they were already aware of what those weapons are based on other letters Paul wrote to the various churches.

One obvious weapon is the weapon of truth. Believers are given insight into both the earthly realm and the heavenly realm because of what has been revealed in Scripture. We know what is behind the forces we wrestle with (Ephesians 6:12).

Another weapon is love. In fact, the Bible links truth with love ("speaking the truth in love" –Ephesians 4:15). Love is also a very powerful weapon in this spiritual warfare that we encounter. We should not approach people with anger or judgmentalism. But we must understand how important love is in dealing with others (1 Corinthians 13).

A third weapon is faith. Faith is defined as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Notice that faith is a conviction of things that are not seen. This is an important attribute since spiritual warfare is an invisible war. Faith is the recognition of this invisible world and the confidence that God is still in control.

And a very important weapon is prayer. We are told in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to pray continually (some translations say to pray without ceasing). We are exhorted to pray about the circumstances we encounter and to use prayer as a weapon in our spiritual battle. When Paul talks about Christians putting on the armor to fight spiritual battles, he says that "with all prayer and petition" we are to "pray at all times in the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:18).

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# Same Sex Marriage: A Facade of Normalcy

*Sue Bohlin takes a look at the arguments for same sex marriage and finds them lacking from a Christian, biblical worldview perspective. She explains that those pushing for same sex marriage have redefined it into something it never was and was*

*never intended to be.*

## What's Marriage For?

In any discussion on same sex marriage, we need to start at the beginning: What is marriage is for, anyway? Marriage begins a family. The family is the basic building block of society. It has always been this way from Adam and Eve down to today.

Man did not invent marriage; God did. He invented and ordained marriage as the foundation for all human society when He gave Eve to Adam and pronounced them man and wife. Marriage is one of those institutions that is found in every human culture. Across the globe and across the ages, marriage has always been defined the same way: one man and one woman in a committed relationship, providing a safe place to bear and raise children. I would suggest that since this pattern for marriage applies to all cultures and all times, this indicates that God is its inventor and creator. It's such an intrinsic part of the way we relate to each other that even those who have lost track of the story of the true God (the non-Judeo-Christian cultures) still practice marriage according to the pattern God designed: one man and one woman in a committed relationship, providing a safe place to bear and raise children.

God has woven "marriage into human nature so that it serves two primary purposes throughout all societies."{1} The first is the way men and women were created to complement each other. Marriage balances the strengths and weaknesses of masculinity and femininity. Women help civilize men and channel their sexual energy in productive rather than destructive ways. Men protect and provide for women—and any children they produce together.

Marriage is built on a basic building block of humanity—that we exist as male and female. The strong benefit of marriage as God intended it is that males and females are designed with

profound and wonderful differences, and these differences are coordinated in marriage so that each contributes what the other lacks.{2}

The second purpose of marriage is producing, protecting, and providing for children. Marriage ensures that children have the benefits of both mother and father. Each gender makes a unique and important contribution to children's development and emotional health, and marriage provides the best possible environment for children to thrive as they enjoy the benefits of masculinity and femininity.

Those who are pushing for same sex marriage don't see marriage this way. They seek to redefine it as a way to get society's stamp of approval on their sexual and emotional relationships, and a way to secure financial and other benefits. Both of these reasons are about the adults, not about children. Both reasons are driven by the philosophy of "How can I get what I want? How can I be happy?" It's a very self-centered movement.

Many homosexuals want the right to marry only because it confers society's ultimate stamp of approval on a sexual relationship—*not* because they want to participate in the institution of marriage.

## Why Same Sex Relationships Are Wrong

Let's look at several reasons (though not an exhaustive list by any means) that same sex relationships are wrong.

First, homosexuality is an attempt to meet legitimate needs in illegitimate, ungodly ways. We all have God-given heart hungers to feel loved and known and validated—to feel that we matter. God intends for us to have those needs met first by our parents and then by our peers, but sometimes something goes wrong. People find themselves walking around with a gaping, aching hole in their souls, longing to make the connections that didn't happen when they were supposed to,

earlier in their lives. From both the women and the men that I know who are dealing with unwanted homosexuality, I hear the same thing: “I just want to be held, I just want to be known, I just want to be special to someone.” But turning to homosexual or lesbian relationships to get those needs met is not God’s intention for us.

Second, same sex relationships are outside of (and fall far short of) God’s created intention for sex. God made us male and female, designed to complement each other physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Two men or two women coming together can never live out God’s intent for His creation. The biology of our gender shows us that same sex relationships don’t work, but opposite sex relationships do. It is unwise to ignore the obvious about how the pieces fit, or don’t fit, as the case may be.

Third, marriage is an earthbound illustration of the mystery of Christ and the church.{3} There is a mystical unity of two very different, very *other* beings coming together as one. Only the profound differences of man and woman display this mystery. “If the man represents Christ and the woman represents the church, then a male to male partnering would be, in essence, a symbolic partnering of God with Himself apart from His people. Likewise, a lesbian relationship would become a symbolic partnering of God’s people without Him. Either option is incomplete, unnatural, and abhorrent.”{4}

Fourth, same sex relationships are idolatrous. In Romans 1, Paul describes the downward spiral of people who worship the creature instead of the Creator. When God says intimate relationships with people of the same sex are forbidden, and people insist on pursuing them anyway, they have elevated something else to the position of a god. It could be the other person, or sexual pleasure, or even just one’s own feelings, but all these things become idols because they are more important than anything else, including God.

Homosexual and lesbian relationships are wrong because God designed us for something far better. The nature of the gospel is to bring transformation to every aspect of a believer's life, and many people have discovered the "something better." (See my article, "Can Homosexuals Change?")

## The Differences Between Heterosexual and Homosexual Relationships

Sometimes you hear gays or lesbians say, "We're just like anybody else. We have two kids, a dog, a mortgage, and we worry about the economy. We just don't want anybody telling us who we can love." My friend Brady, who used to be part of that gay sub-culture, calls the homosexual lifestyle "a façade of normalcy." And it is *only* a façade.

Consider the huge variance in the stability of relationships. Despite a high divorce rate, 57% of heterosexual marriages last over twenty years.{5} The average length of homosexual relationships is two to three years.{6} Only 5% of them last 20 years.{7}

And consider the issue of promiscuity. In heterosexual marriages, over three-fourths of the men and 88% of the women remain faithful to their marriage vows.{8} Most sexually active gay men are promiscuous, engaging hundreds of sexual partners over a lifetime.{9}

The concept of a committed relationship is very different for the two groups. Most heterosexual couples are faithful and stable. When homosexual men are in what they call a "committed" relationship, this usually includes three to five outside partners each year.{10} Rev. Troy Perry, founder of the Metropolitan Community Church, told the *Dallas Morning News*, "Monogamy is not a word the gay community uses. . . . We talk about fidelity. That means you live in a loving, caring, honest relationship with your partner. Because we can't marry,

we have people with widely varying opinions as to what that means. Some would say that committed couples could have multiple sexual partners as long as there's no deception. Each couple has to decide."{11}

In Holland, which legalized gay marriage in 2001, the average is eight outside partners.{12} One study of gay men who had been together for over five years could not find one single monogamous relationship.{13} Not one!

Women in lesbian relationships often stay together not because they want to, but because they're stuck financially and emotionally. "I heard one speaker say at a Love Won Out conference, "We don't have partners, we have prisoners." Of course, that's not universally true, but over the years of walking toward Jesus with women who were no longer in lesbian partnerships, I have heard over and over, "We didn't know how to do life apart from each other."

Heterosexuals live longer, happier lives. Sexually active homosexual men live a dangerous and destructive lifestyle. They are at huge risk for contracting AIDS, and run a much higher risk of sexually transmitted diseases than straight men. The gay community experiences three times more alcoholism and drug abuse,{14} and much more promiscuity and domestic violence than the straight world.{15} Gay men can expect to live twenty years less than their straight neighbors.{16}

And finally, a home with a mom and a dad is the best possible place for children. Homosexual parents put kids at risk. The American College of Pediatrics discovered that children raised by gay parents tend to be more dissatisfied with their own gender, suffer a greater rate of molestation in the family, have homosexual experiences more often, and are encouraged to experiment in dangerous, destructive lifestyle choices.{17}

Please hear me: We're commenting on the extremely high-risk *behavior* that is part and parcel of a homosexual lifestyle.

That’s not the same thing as condemning the *people* who engage in it. A homosexual lifestyle *is* a façade of normalcy, but it can be changed.

## Answering Arguments for Same Sex Marriage

Let’s look at several arguments being offered for same sex marriage.

The first is that marriage will encourage faithfulness and stability in volatile homosexual relationships. But the nature of homosexual and lesbian relationships is broken to begin with. Two broken people will not create a whole, healthy relationship. The best description I’ve ever heard of same sex relationships is “one broken little boy looking for his daddy, connecting with another broken little boy, looking for *his* daddy.” And the same is true of women. Neither a marriage license, nor the approval of society, can fix the nature of a relationship that is irretrievably broken at its core.

Another argument is that we need same sex marriage to insure hospital visitation. But it’s the patient who decides. If he appoints his partner as a health-care proxy, even if he’s in a coma that document will insure access to the hospital. We don’t need marriage for that. It’s a smokescreen.

A third argument is that we need same sex marriage to insure survivorship benefits. But that’s what a will is for. You don’t need marriage for that.

Some say that we need same sex marriage for Social Security benefits. This is an interesting argument, since Social Security benefits were created to address the financial inequity of father as breadwinner and mother as stay-at-home caregiver. Homosexual relationships are usually two-incomes. It’s very rare to have one stay-at-home caregiver of the kids, since homosexual relationships do not and cannot produce children naturally. When they do, they are borrowing from

God’s plan for creating families.

Then there’s the discrimination argument. There are really two issues that fall under this argument: *denied liberties* and *denied benefits*.

Concerning the issue of denying the liberty to marry, this argument doesn’t hold water. Any person can marry whoever he or she pleases, with certain restrictions that are true for everyone. You can’t marry a child, a close blood relative, a person who is already married, or a person of the same sex. These restrictions apply equally to everyone; there is no discrimination here. The problem is, some people don’t like the restrictions.

True discrimination functions against an unchangeable identity, such as gender or color. Homosexuality is a lifestyle, a chosen behavior. Even sexual orientation is changeable. It’s not easy, but it *is* possible.

The other issue of discrimination is denied benefits. But benefits are granted to families because society has an interest in providing a safe place for children to grow up and be nurtured. So the government provides child-oriented benefits such as inheritance rights and tax relief to ease the financial burden of children. Insurance policies and Social Security benefits provide for the money gap between wage-earner and caregiver. These benefits are inherent to *families*. The essence of marriage is about building families. Homosexual relationships cannot build families legitimately. They have to borrow from heterosexual relationships or technology to create children.

## Final Points to Consider

Joe Dallas draws on his wisdom and experience as a former homosexual to address the issue of same sex marriage in his book *When Homosexuality Hits Home.* He provides some excellent

points to consider about this subject.{18}

We can recognize that people genuinely love each other, and we can respect their right to form a partnership, even if we disagree with the nature of their partnership. We can say a relationship is wrong without disrespecting or condemning the people in that relationship.

For example, look at the relationship between Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn. Tracy was a married man when he met and fell in love with her. For decades they had a deeply committed and affectionate relationship although they never married. Note two glaring and conflicting facts about their relationship: it was adulterous, and therefore wrong, and they truly loved each other. You can find a number of good things about their relationship, such as the way they respected each other and cared deeply for each other and seemed to be good for each other. When we say it was morally wrong, this does not deny the good things about their relationship. But to recognize the good things does not change the fact that it was morally wrong. The two are not mutually exclusive.

With gay or lesbian couples, we can acknowledge that there may, indeed, be deep love and commitment to each other. After all, humans have an amazing God-given capacity to love—even outside the bounds of His design and commands. But God cannot and does not sanction homosexual relationships, so we cannot either. We can respect those involved without capitulating to their demands.

Redefining marriage is especially unacceptable to Christians, since it is spelled out in both Testaments as a type of God's relationship with His people. In the Old Testament, God is portrayed as the husband of the nation of Israel, and in the New Testament, Jesus is the bridegroom of the Church. Marriage is far more than a social construct that provides for the creation of new families. It is a living parable that helps us to understand the dynamic, mysterious relationship between God

and His people. How can we redefine something that has such a deep, spiritual meaning? Even if that were not part of the equation, we would still need to deal with the truth that marriage was created by God, and we do not have the right to tinker with His creation.

The problem with same sex marriage is that it doesn't work, it doesn't fit, and it is an attempt to make right something that is intrinsically, irretrievably wrong. God created us in His image as both male and female, and intends that His full image be expressed as men and women come together in designed complementarity. This is impossible in same sex marriage.

**Notes**

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**See Also:**

• Can Homosexuals Change?

• Did Phil Get It Wrong? Is Homosexuality Sin?

• Homosexual Myths

• Homosexuality: Questions and Answers

• Homosexual Theology

• When Someone In Your Congregation Says "I'm Gay" (Pastors' Brochure)

And also our answers to e-mails about homosexuality issues

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# Capital Punishment: A Christian View and Biblical Perspective

*Kerby Anderson provides a biblical worldview perspective on capital punishment. He explores the biblical teaching to help us understand how to consider this controversial topic apply Christian love and biblical principles.*

Should Christians support the death penalty? The answer to that question is controversial. Many Christians feel that the Bible has spoken to the issue, but others believe that the New Testament ethic of love replaces the Old Testament law.

## Old Testament Examples

Throughout the Old Testament we find many cases in which God commands the use of capital punishment. We see this first with the acts of God Himself. God was involved, either directly or indirectly, in the taking of life as a punishment for the nation of Israel or for those who threatened or harmed Israel.

One example is the flood of Noah in Genesis 6-8. God destroyed all human and animal life except that which was on the ark. Another example is Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18-19), where God destroyed the two cities because of the heinous sin of the inhabitants. In the time of Moses, God took the lives of the Egyptians' first-born sons (Exod. 11) and destroyed the Egyptian army in the Red Sea (Exod. 14). There were also punishments such as the punishment at Kadesh-Barnea (Num. 13-14) or the rebellion of Korah (Num. 16) against the Jews wandering in the wilderness.

The Old Testament is replete with references and examples of God taking life. In a sense, God used capital punishment to deal with Israel's sins and the sins of the nations surrounding Israel.

The Old Testament also teaches that God instituted capital punishment in the Jewish law code. In fact, the principle of capital punishment even precedes the Old Testament law code. According to Genesis 9:6, capital punishment is based upon a belief in the sanctity of life. It says, "Whoever sheds man's blood by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God, He made man."

The Mosaic Law set forth numerous offenses that were punishable by death. The first was murder. In Exodus 21, God commanded capital punishment for murderers. Premeditated murder (or what the Old Testament described as "lying in wait") was punishable by death. A second offense punishable by death was involvement in the occult (Exod. 22; Lev. 20; Deut 18-19). This included sorcery, divination, acting as a medium, and sacrificing to false gods. Third, capital punishment was to be used against perpetrators of sexual sins such as rape, incest, or homosexual practice.

Within this Old Testament theocracy, capital punishment was extended beyond murder to cover various offenses. While the death penalty for these offenses was limited to this

particular dispensation of revelation, notice that the principle in Genesis 9:6 is not tied to the theocracy. Instead, the principle of *Lex Talionis* (a life for a life) is tied to the creation order. Capital punishment is warranted due to the sanctity of life. Even before we turn to the New Testament, we find this universally binding principle that precedes the Old Testament law code.

## New Testament Principles

Some Christians believe that capital punishment does not apply to the New Testament and church age.

First we must acknowledge that God gave the principle of capital punishment even before the institution of the Old Testament law code. In Genesis 9:6 we read that "Whoever sheds man's blood by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God, He made man." Capital punishment was instituted by God because humans are created in the image of God. The principle is not rooted in the Old Testament theocracy, but rather in the creation order. It is a much broader biblical principle that carries into the New Testament.

Even so, some Christians argue that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus seems to be arguing against capital punishment. But is He?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not arguing against the principle of a life for a life. Rather He is speaking to the issue of our personal desire for vengeance. He is not denying the power and responsibility of the government. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is speaking to individual Christians. He is telling Christians that they should not try to replace the power of the government. Jesus does not deny the power and authority of government, but rather He calls individual Christians to love their enemies and turn the other cheek.

Some have said that Jesus set aside capital punishment in John

8 when He did not call for the woman caught in adultery to be stoned. But remember the context. The Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus between the Roman law and the Mosaic law. If He said that they should stone her, He would break the Roman law. If He refused to allow them to stone her, He would break the Mosaic law (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22). Jesus' answer avoided the conflict: He said that he who was without sin should cast the first stone. Since He did teach that a stone be thrown (John 8:7), this is not an abolition of the death penalty.

In other places in the New Testament we see the principle of capital punishment being reinforced. Romans 13:1-7, for example, teaches that human government is ordained by God and that the civil magistrate is a minister of God. We are to obey government for we are taught that government does not bear the sword in vain. The fact that the Apostle Paul used the image of the sword further supports the idea that capital punishment was to be used by government in the New Testament age as well. Rather than abolish the idea of the death penalty, Paul uses the emblem of the Roman sword to reinforce the idea of capital punishment. The New Testament did not abolish the death penalty; it reinforced the principle of capital punishment.

## Capital Punishment and Deterrence

Is capital punishment a deterrent to crime? At the outset, we should acknowledge that the answer to this question should not change our perspective on this issue. Although it is an important question, it should not be the basis for our belief. A Christian's belief in capital punishment should be based upon what the Bible teaches not on a pragmatic assessment of whether or not capital punishment deters crime.

That being said, however, we should try to assess the effectiveness of capital punishment. Opponents of capital punishment argue that it is not a deterrent, because in some states where capital punishment is allowed the crime rate goes up. Should we therefore conclude that capital punishment is

not a deterrent?

First, we should recognize that crime rates have been increasing for some time. The United States is becoming a violent society as its social and moral fabric breaks down. So the increase in the crime rate is most likely due to many other factors and cannot be correlated with a death penalty that has been implemented sparingly and sporadically.

Second, there is some evidence that capital punishment is a deterrent. And even if we are not absolutely sure of its deterrent effect, the death penalty should be implemented. If it is a deterrent, then implementing capital punishment certainly will save lives. If it is not, then we still will have followed biblical injunctions and put convicted murderers to death.

In a sense, opponents of capital punishment who argue that it is not a deterrent are willing to give the benefit of the doubt to the criminal rather than to the victim. The poet Hyman Barshay put it this way:

> *The death penalty is a warning, just like a lighthouse throwing its beams out to sea. We hear about shipwrecks, but we do not hear about the ships the lighthouse guides safely on their way. We do not have proof of the number of ships it saves, but we do not tear the lighthouse down."(1)*

If capital punishment is even a potential deterrent, that is a significant enough social reason to implement it.

Statistical analysis by Dr. Isaac Ehrlich at the University of Chicago suggests that capital punishment is a deterrent.(2) Although his conclusions were vigorously challenged, further cross- sectional analysis has confirmed his conclusions.(3) His research has shown that if the death penalty is used in a consistent way, it may deter as many as eight murders for every execution carried out. If these numbers are indeed

accurate, it demonstrates that capital punishment could be a significant deterrent to crime in our society.

Certainly capital punishment will not deter all crime. Psychotic and deranged killers, members of organized crime, and street gangs will no doubt kill whether capital punishment is implemented or not. A person who is irrational or wants to commit a murder will do so whether capital punishment exists or not. But social statistics as well as logic suggest that rational people will be deterred from murder because capital punishment is part of the criminal code.

## Capital Punishment and Discrimination

Many people oppose capital punishment because they feel it is discriminatory. The charge is somewhat curious since most of the criminals that have been executed in the last decade are white rather than black. Nevertheless, a higher percentage of ethnic minorities (African-American, Hispanic-American) are on death row. So is this a significant argument against capital punishment?

First, we should note that much of the evidence for discrimination is circumstantial. Just because there is a higher percentage of a particular ethnic group does not, in and of itself, constitute discrimination. A high percentage of whites playing professional ice hockey or a high percentage of blacks playing professional basketball does not necessarily mean that discrimination has taken place. We need to look beneath the allegation and see if true discrimination is taking place.

Second, we can and should acknowledge that some discrimination does take place in the criminal justice system. Discrimination takes place not only on the basis of race, but on the basis of wealth. Wealthy defendants can hire a battery of legal experts to defend themselves, while poor defendants must relay on a court- appointed public attorney.

Even if we acknowledge that there is some evidence of discrimination in the criminal justice system, does it likewise hold that there is discrimination with regard to capital punishment? The U.S. Solicitor General, in his amicus brief for the case *Gregg vs. Georgia*, argued that sophisticated sociological studies demonstrated that capital punishment showed no evidence of racial discrimination.(4) These studies compared the number of crimes committed with the number that went to trial and the number of guilty verdicts rendered and found that guilty verdicts were consistent across racial boundaries.

But even if we find evidence for discrimination in the criminal justice system, notice that this is not really an argument against capital punishment. It is a compelling argument for reform of the criminal justice system. It is an argument for implementing capital punishment carefully.

We may conclude that we will only use the death penalty in cases where certainty exists (e.g., eyewitness accounts, videotape evidence). But discrimination in the criminal justice system is not truly an argument against capital punishment. At its best, it is an argument for its careful implementation.

In fact, most of the social and philosophical arguments against capital punishment are really not arguments against it at all. These arguments are really arguments for improving the criminal justice system. If discrimination is taking place and guilty people are escaping penalty, then that is an argument for extending the penalty, not doing away with it. Furthermore, opponents of capital punishment candidly admit that they would oppose the death penalty even if it were an effective deterrent.(5) So while these are important social and political issues to consider, they are not sufficient justification for the abolition of the death penalty.

# Objections to Capital Punishment

One objection to capital punishment is that the government is itself committing murder. Put in theological terms, doesn't the death penalty violate the sixth commandment, which teaches "Thou shalt not kill?"

First, we must understand the context of this verse. The verb used in Exodus 20:13 is best translated "to murder." It is used 49 times in the Old Testament, and it is always used to describe premeditated murder. It is never used of animals, God, angels, or enemies in battle. So the commandment is not teaching that all killing is wrong; it is teaching that murder is wrong.

Second, the penalty for breaking the commandment was death (Ex.21:12; Num. 35:16-21). We can conclude therefore that when the government took the life of a murderer, the government was not itself guilty of murder. Opponents of capital punishment who accuse the government of committing murder by implementing the death penalty fail to see the irony of using Exodus 20 to define murder but ignoring Exodus 21, which specifically teaches that government is to punish the murderer.

A second objection to capital punishment questions the validity of applying the Old Testament law code to today's society. After all, wasn't the Mosaic Law only for the Old Testament theocracy? There are a number of ways to answer this objection.

First, we must question the premise. There is and should be a relationship between Old Testament laws and modern laws. We may no longer be subject to Old Testament ceremonial law, but that does not invalidate God's moral principles set down in the Old Testament. Murder is still wrong. Thus, since murder is wrong, the penalty for murder must still be implemented.

Second, even if we accept the premise that the Old Testament

law code was specifically and uniquely for the Old Testament theocracy, this still does not abolish the death penalty. Genesis 9:6 precedes the Old Testament theocracy, and its principle is tied to the creation order. Capital punishment is to be implemented because of the sanctity of human life. We are created in God's image. When a murder occurs, the murderer must be put to death. This is a universally binding principle not confined merely to the Old Testament theocracy.

Third, it is not just the Old Testament that teaches capital punishment. Romans 13:1-7 specifically teaches that human government is ordained by God and that we are to obey government because government does not bear the sword in vain. Human governments are given the responsibility to punish wrongdoers, and this includes murderers who are to be given the death penalty.

Finally, capital punishment is never specifically removed or replaced in the Bible. While some would argue that the New Testament ethic replaces the Old Testament ethic, there is no instance in which a replacement ethic is introduced. As we have already seen, Jesus and the disciples never disturb the Old Testament standard of capital punishment. The Apostle Paul teaches that we are to live by grace with one another, but also teaches that we are to obey human government that bears the sword. Capital punishment is taught in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

**Notes**

1. Hyman Barshay, quoted in "On Deterrence and the Death Penalty" by Ernest van den Haag, *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology and Police Science* no. 2 (1969).

2. Isaac Ehrlich, "The Deterrent Effect of Capital Punishment: A Question of Life and Death," *American Economic Review*, June 1975.

3. *Journal of Legal Studies*, January 1977; *Journal of Political Economy*, June 1977; *American Economic Review*, June 1977.

4. Frank Carrington, *Neither Cruel nor Unusual: The Case for Capital Punishment* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington, 1978), 118.

5. Further discussion of these points can be found in an essay by Ernest van den Haag, "The Collapse of the Case Against Capital Punishment," *National Review*, 31 March 1978, 395-407.

A more complete discussion of capital punishment can be found in chapter 10 of *Living Ethically in the 90s* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1990), available from Probe Ministries.

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# The Case for Christ – Reasons to Believe in the Reality of Christ

*Dr. Ray Bohlin summarizes the evidence found by Lee Strobel when researching the question: Is Jesus Christ really who the Bible says He is? He shows that we have strong evidence on every front that backs up our belief in Jesus as the Son of God. This important apologetic argument helps us understand the enduring value of Christianity.*

## Sometimes the Evidence Doesn't Stack Up

Skeptics around the world claim that Jesus either never said He was God or He never exemplified the activities and mindset of God. Either way they rather triumphantly proclaim that Jesus was just a man. Some will go so far as to suggest that He was a very moral and special man, but a man nonetheless. Well, Lee Strobel was just such a skeptic. For Strobel, there was far too much evidence against the idea of God, let alone the possibility that God became a man. God was just mythology, superstition, or wishful thinking.

As a graduate of Yale Law School, an investigative reporter, and eventual legal affairs editor for the *Chicago Tribune*, Strobel was familiar with the weighing of evidence. He was familiar with plenty of university professors who knew Jesus as an iconoclastic Jew, a revolutionary, or a sage, but not God. He had read just enough philosophy and history to support his skepticism.

As Strobel himself says,

> As far as I was concerned, the case was closed. There was enough proof for me to rest easy with the conclusion that the divinity of Jesus was nothing more than the fanciful invention of superstitious people. Or so I thought.{1}

That last hesitation came as a result of his wife's conversion. After the predictable rolling of the eyes and fears of his wife being the victim of a bait and switch scam, he noticed some very positive changes he found attractive and intriguing. The reporter in him eventually wanted to get to the bottom of this and he launched his own personal investigation. Setting aside as best he could his own personal interest and prejudices, he began reading and studying, interviewing experts, examining archaeology and the Bible.

Over time the evidence began to point to the previously unthinkable. Strobel's book *The Case for Christ* is a revisiting of his earlier quest. He interviews a host of experts along three lines of evidence. In the first section Strobel investigates what he calls the record. What did the eyewitnesses say they saw and heard? Can they be trusted? Can the gospel accounts be trusted? What about evidence from outside the Bible? Does archaeology help or hurt the case for Christ? Strobel puts tough questions to his experts and their answers will both surprise and exhilarate.

In the third section of the book, Strobel investigates the resurrection. He examines the medical evidence, explores the

implications of the empty tomb, the reliability of the appearances after the resurrection, and the wide-ranging circumstantial evidence.

However, here we'll focus on the middle section of the book, the analysis of Jesus Himself. Did Jesus really think He was God? Was He crazy? Did He act like He was God? And did He truly match the picture painted in the Old Testament of the Messiah?

## Was Jesus Really Convinced that He Was the Son of God?

The psychological profiler is a new weapon in the arsenal of criminal investigators. They understand that behavior reflects personality. These highly trained professionals examine the actions and words of criminals and from these clues construct a psychological and sometimes historical profile of the likely perpetrator.

These same skills can be applied to our question of whether Jesus actually thought He was God. We can learn a great deal about what Jesus thought of Himself, not just from what He said, but what He did and how He did it.

Ben Witherington was educated at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (M. Div.) and the University of Durham in England (Th. D.). He has taught at several universities and seminaries and authored numerous books and articles about the person of Jesus.

Strobel began his interview by stating that Jesus wasn't very forthcoming about His identity in public, even mysterious. He didn't come right out and say He was the Son of God or the Messiah. Couldn't it be that Jesus simply didn't see Himself that way?

Witherington points out that Jesus needed to operate in the

context of His day. To boldly state that He was God would have at first confused and then maddened the Jews of His day. Blasphemy was not treated lightly. Therefore He was very careful, especially at first, of what He said publicly.

There are other clues to Jesus' self-identity as God. He chose twelve disciples, as God chose the twelve nations of Israel. He called John the Baptist the greatest man on earth; yet He went on to do even greater things in His miracles. He told the Pharisees, in contradiction to much of the Old Testament law, that what defiled a man was what came out of his mouth, not what he put in it. "We have to ask, what kind of person thinks he has the authority to set aside the divinely inspired Jewish Scriptures and supplant them with his own teaching."{2} Even the Romans labeled Him King of the Jews. Either Jesus actually said that or someone thought He did.

Since Jesus' followers called Him Rabboni or Rabbi, it seems they just thought of Him as a teacher and nothing more. But Witherington reminds us that Jesus actually taught in a radical new way. In Judaism, the authority of two or more witnesses was required for the proclamation of truth. But Jesus frequently said, "Amen I say to you," or in modern English, "I swear in advance to the truthfulness of what I am about to say." Jesus attested to the truth of what He was saying on His own authority. This was truly revolutionary.

The evidence that Jesus believed that He stood in the very place of God is absolutely convincing. Maybe He was just crazy. We'll explore that question next.

## Was Jesus Crazy When He Claimed to be the Son of God?

There's considerable doubt in the general public about the usefulness of psychological testimony in the courtroom. It seems that you can find some psychologist to testify to just about anything concerning someone's state of mind at the time

a crime was committed. But while abuses can occur, most people recognize that a trained and experienced psychologist can offer helpful insights into a person's state of mind while examining his words and actions.

In our investigation of Jesus, if He really believed He was God, can we determine if He was crazy or insane? You can visit just about any mental health facility and be introduced to people who think they are Julius Caesar or Napoleon or even Jesus Christ. Could Jesus have been deluded?

Not so, according to Gary Collins, a psychologist with a doctorate in clinical psychology from Purdue and the author of numerous books and articles in popular magazines and professional journals. Disturbed individuals often show signs of depression or anxiety or explosive anger. But Jesus never displays inappropriate emotions.

He does get angry, but this is clearly appropriate—in the temple, for instance, when He saw the misuse of the temple courtyard and that the moneychangers were taking advantage of the poor. He didn't just get ticked off because someone was annoying Him. In fact, Jesus seems at His most composed when being challenged. In a beautiful passage, Collins describes Jesus as he would an old friend:

> He was loving but didn't let his compassion immobilize him; he didn't have a bloated ego, even though he was often surrounded by adoring crowds; he maintained balance despite an often demanding lifestyle; he always knew what he was doing and where he was going; he cared deeply about people, including women and children, who weren't seen as being important back then; he was able to accept people while not merely winking at their sin; he responded to individuals based on where they were at and what they uniquely needed. All in all I just don't see signs that Jesus was suffering from any known mental illness.{3}

OK, so maybe Jesus wasn't mentally disturbed, but maybe He used psychological tricks to perform His miracles. Many illnesses are psychosomatic, so maybe His healings were just by the power of suggestion. Collins readily admits that maybe some of Jesus' miracles were of this very type, but they were still healed. And some of His miracles just can't fit this description. Jesus healed leprosy and people blind since birth, both of which would be difficult to pull off as a psychological trick. His miracles over nature also can't be explained psychologically, and raising Lazarus from the dead after being in the tomb for a few days is not the stuff of trickery. No, Jesus wasn't crazy.

## Did Jesus Fulfill the Attributes of God?

Modern forensics utilizes artists who are able to sketch the appearance of a criminal based on the recollections of the victims. This is an important tool to be able to alert the public as to the appearance of a usually violent offender. In Lee Strobel's investigation of the evidence for Jesus, he uses the Old Testament as a sketch of what God is supposed to be like. If Jesus claims to be God, then what we see of Him in the Gospels should mirror the picture of God in the Old Testament.

For this purpose, Strobel interviewed Dr. D. A. Carson, research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. Carson can read a dozen languages and has authored or edited over forty books about Jesus and the New Testament.

At the start of the interview, Strobel asks Carson, "What did Jesus say or do that convinces you that Jesus is God?" The answer was a little surprising. Jesus forgave sins.

We all see ourselves as having the power and authority to forgive someone who has wronged us. Jesus forgave people for things they did that didn't involve Jesus at all. This was

startling for that time and even today. Only God can truly forgive sins, and Jesus specifically does so on a number of occasions.{4}

In addition, Jesus considered himself to be without sin. Historically, we consider people to be holy who are fully conscious of their own failures and are fighting them honestly in the power of the Holy Spirit. But Jesus gave no such impression. In that wonderful chapter, John 8, Jesus asks if anyone can convict Him of sin (John 8:46). The question itself is startling, but no one answers. Sinlessness is another attribute of deity.

This chapter is a wonderful interview with Carson, covering other questions, such as: how could Jesus be God and actually be born; or say that the Father was greater than He; or not speak out strongly against the slavery of the Jewish and Roman culture; or believe in and send people to Hell? I'll leave you to explore those fascinating questions on your own in the book.

Strobel concludes that the Bible declares several attributes for God and applies them to Jesus. John 16:30 records one of the disciples saying, "Now we can see that you know all things." Jesus says in Matthew 28:20, "Surely I am with you even unto the end of the age." And in Matthew 18:20 He says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them." All authority was given Him (Matthew 28:18) and Hebrews tells us that He is the same yesterday and today. So Jesus is omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, and immutable. In John 14:7, Jesus says, "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well."

## Did Jesus—and Jesus Alone—Match the Identity of the Messiah?

So far in Strobel's interviews with scholars we have affirmed that Jesus did claim to be God, He wasn't insane or

emotionally disturbed, and He did things that only God would do. Now we want to review Strobel's interview with Louis Lapides, a Jewish believer as to whether Jesus actually fit the Old Testament picture of what the Messiah would be like.

One of the important pieces of evidence that convinced Lapides that Jesus was the long-looked-for Messiah was the fulfillment of prophecy. There are over forty prophecies concerning the coming Messiah, and Jesus fulfilled every one. Some say this is just coincidence. But, the odds of just one person fulfilling even five of these prophesies is less than one chance in one hundred million billion—a number millions of times greater than the number of all people who have ever lived on earth.{5}

But maybe this isn't all it seems. Objections to the correlation of Jesus' life to the prophecies of the Messiah fall into four categories. The first is the coincidence argument, which we just dispelled. Perhaps the most frequently heard argument is that the gospel writers fabricated the details to make it appear that Jesus was the Messiah. But the gospels were written close enough in time to the actual events that, if false, critics could have exposed the details. Certainly this is true of those in the Jewish community who had every reason to squash this new religion before it got started.

Third, there is the suggestion that Jesus intentionally fulfilled these many prophecies so as to make Himself appear as the Messiah. That's conceivable for some of the prophecies, such as Jesus' riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, but for others it's impossible. How could Jesus arrange for his ancestry, or place of birth, or the method of execution, or that soldiers would gamble for his clothing? The list goes on.

Fourth, perhaps Christians have just ripped these so-called prophecies out of context and have misinterpreted them. When asked, Lapides sighed and replied:

> You know, I go through books that people write to try to tear down what we believe. That's not fun to do, but I spend the time to look at each objection individually and then to research the context and the wording in the original language. And every single time, the prophecies have stood up and shown themselves to be true.{6}

What I found most intriguing about the interviews was the combination of academic integrity on the part of these scholars alongside a very evident love for the One of whom they were speaking. For these scholars, finding the historical Jesus was not just an academic exercise, but also a life-changing personal encounter with Jesus. Perhaps it can be for you too.

**Notes**

1. Lee Strobel, 1998, *The Case for Christ*, Grand Rapids Michigan/Zondervan Publishing House, p. 13.
2. Ben Witherington, quoted in *The Case for Christ*, p. 135.
3. Gary Collins, quoted in *The Case for Christ*, p. 147.
4. Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, p. 157-158.
5. Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, p. 183.
6. Louis Lapides, quoted in *The Case for Christ*, p. 185.

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# "I'm a Mormon and I Have Questions about Your Article"

**I read your article A Short Look at Six World Religions and it said that many of Joseph Smith's prophecies never came true. Which prophecies are those?**

**I also read, “Both of these religions teach salvation by works, not God’s grace.” I have been a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from 8 years of age, and I have always been taught that we are saved by the grace of God. However, salvation is not free. For example, if one chooses to not live the commandments that God has given, then how can he be worthy to live in the presence of God? Here is a quote from the Book of Mormon: “For we know that it is by grace that we are saved after all that we can do.” (page 99-100). Jesus Christ paid the price for our sins, but we must do our part to accept his atonement and live his commandments. Accepting his atonement is not enough. Through the grace of our loving Savior we can be redeemed from our sins and return to the presence of our Heavenly Father clean from all sin, again if we keep his commandments the best we know how. God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ are the perfect examples of mercy.**

**Have a good day and thank you for teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, who is my best friend.**

Hello _____,

Jesus is my best friend too! <smile>

> *I read your A Short Look at Six World Religions and it said that many of Joseph Smith’s prophecies never came true. Which prophecies are those?*

I cited a few of them in a response to an e-mail about my article. Your question prompted me to add a link to that article at the end of the one you read, but here’s a direct link for you.

> *I also read, “Both of these religions teach salvation by works, not God’s grace.” I have been a member of the Chruch of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from 8 years of age, and I have always been taught that we are saved by the grace of God. However, salvation is not free.*

I would agree that salvation was not free for God, for whom it cost Him EVERYTHING. But it *is* a free gift for us. Please note Ephesians 2:8,9:

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

This scripture is diametrically opposed to Mormon doctrine. We cannot do anything to contribute to our salvation. Isaiah 64:6 says that all our righteousness is as filthy rags; what can we possibly give to God that will overcome the heinous sin of requiring the death of His Son to be reconciled to Him? If someone came in here and murdered one of my sons and then said, “Hey, I don’t want you to be mad at me. . . let me do something to help me get myself in your good graces. Here’s a nickel. . .”—Well, guess what? That wouldn’t work! And it doesn’t work with God either.

_____, I pray the Lord will open your eyes to see that trying to earn salvation with our paltry efforts—even WITH His grace—is a slap in the face of our God. He wants us to come to Him with empty hands and the realization that we do not deserve and cannot earn the gift of eternal life that comes ONLY through trusting in the Lord Jesus.

Warmly,

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

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# Are You Listening? Do You

# Hear What I Hear?

*Have you ever missed a great opportunity because you weren't listening carefully? Twenty centuries ago some clues to impending good news of monumental import eluded most folks. Fascinating prophecies of Jesus' birth and life bring revealing insights into your own life today.*

Have you ever missed a great opportunity because you weren't listening carefully?

If Mark{1} hadn't been willing to listen, he might have missed some great news. He enjoyed an adequate income, fulfilling work, a comfortable home, and many close friends. Then his employer offered a promotion requiring a move to another state. At first resistant, he eventually decided to listen to the offer and make the move.



Mark's job responsibilities expanded, his growing reputation opened doors for wider influence, and he met and married Gail. Reflecting twenty-five years later, he was glad he had carefully listened to news of the offer.

At a business convention Joan heard a brief announcement of an advanced degree program. Distracted by current concerns, she dismissed it. When the announcement was repeated the next day, Joan caught something she had missed. The degree would be from one of the most prestigious universities in the world. Her company was encouraging managers to participate, promising them time to study, and offering to help pay for it. Joan investigated, enrolled, and her career was greatly enhanced. "To think that I almost missed the good news about this program because I was distracted," Joan reflected. "What a tragedy that would have been."

Perhaps you, too, have encountered news that first seemed

insignificant but later became momentous. Great news isn't always trumpeted by headlines or television broadcasts. Sometimes the best news could slip right by if you're not attuned to its importance.

Twenty centuries ago some clues to impending good news of monumental import eluded most folks. A baby born in relative obscurity in the Middle East was hailed by a few as a future king who would rescue people from their troubles. "Good news of great joy for everyone!" said one announcement of Jesus' birth.{2}

Relatively few contemporaries acknowledged His importance. His followers later showed numerous clues to His identity, prophecies written many years before His birth. You may not share the faith of those early believers, but perhaps you'll find it interesting to eavesdrop on some of the clues, the prophecies. Consider just a few.{3}

## Prophecies Fulfilled in Jesus' Birth

The Hebrew writer Micah told around 700 B.C. of deliverance through a coming Messiah or "Anointed One." He indicated this deliverer would be from Bethlehem. He wrote, "But you . . . Bethlehem . . . are only a small village in Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past." {4}

Matthew, a first-century biographer, noted that ". . . Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. . . ."{5}

Isaiah, writing around 700 B.C., foretold an unusual aspect of the Messiah's birth, that He would be *born of a virgin*. He wrote, "The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."{6}

The name "Immanuel" means "God is with us." The indication—to all who were listening—was that God Himself would be

physically present with humans through this child. What a promise! What good news to people who often felt abandoned by God.

Matthew recorded this about Jesus' birth:

> Now this is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. . . . Joseph . . . brought Mary home to be his wife, but she remained a virgin until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.{7}

Jewish prophets mentioned several clues about the Messiah's lineage. He was to be a *descendant of Abraham*. Moses, a famous Jewish leader writing fourteen hundred years before Jesus' birth, recorded a prophecy about the Jewish patriarch Abraham. He wrote, "Through your [Abraham's] descendants, all the nations of the earth will be blessed."{8}

The Messiah was also to be a *descendant of Isaac*. Moses recorded another promise. He said, "God told Abraham, ' . . . Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted'."{9} In other words, something important was going to come through the descendants of Abraham and specifically through the line of Isaac, one of Abraham's two sons.

The Messiah was also to be a *descendant of Jacob*. Abraham's son Isaac himself had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Some ancient Jewish scholars{10} believed that another prophecy that Moses recorded prefigured the Messiah. Moses wrote, "A star will rise from Jacob; a scepter will emerge from Israel."{11}

Luke, a first-century physician, traced Jesus' lineage through these three Jewish leaders. He wrote of "Jesus . . . the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham. . . ."{12}

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, of a virgin, and from the line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The pieces of the prophetic puzzle

were starting to become clearer. The details of His life would fulfill the prophecies further.

## Prophecies Fulfilled in Jesus' Life and Death

Though Jesus was born in humble circumstances, learned leaders traveled great distances to hail the child as a king. In His youth, scholars marveled at His wisdom. In His thirties He began to publicly offer peace, freedom, purpose and hope to the masses. His message caught on.

His enemies plotted His demise and paid one of his followers to betray Him. His closest friends deserted Him. He was tried, convicted, sentenced and executed. In agony during His execution He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"{13}

Many hurting people feel forsaken by God. But Jesus' cry of desperation carried added significance because of its historical allusion. The words had appeared about a thousand years earlier in a song written by Israel's King David.{14} It said, "All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads."{15} "They have pierced my hands and my feet."{16} "They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing."{17} Historians record precisely this behavior during Jesus' execution.{18} It was as if a divine drama were unfolding as Jesus slipped into death.

Researchers have uncovered more than 300 prophecies that were literally fulfilled in Jesus' life and death. He would be preceded by a messenger who would prepare the way for His work.{19} He would enter the capital city as a king, but riding on a donkey's back.{20} He would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver,{21} pierced,{22} executed with thieves{23} and yet, though wounded,{24} would suffer no broken bones.{25}

In His dying cry from the cross, He reminded His hearers that

His life and death were in precise fulfillment of a previously stated plan. According to a biblical perspective, at the moment of death He experienced the equivalent of eternal separation from God in our place. He suffered the divine penalty due all the shortcomings, injustice, evil, and sin of the world, including yours and mine. Then—again in fulfillment of prophecy{26} and contrary to natural law—He returned to life. As somewhat of a skeptic I investigated the evidence for Christ's resurrection and found it to be one of the best-attested facts in history.{27} To the seeker He offers true inner peace,{28} forgiveness,{29} purpose,{30} and strength for fulfilling living.{31}

Jesus' birth, life, and death fulfilled many prophecies. Many of these fulfillments involved details that were beyond His human control. But could this be coincidence? Could the prophecies have been fulfilled by chance?

## Prophecies Fulfilled by Chance?

My good friend and mentor, Bob Prall, likes to make a distinction between prediction and prophecy{32} and uses a sports analogy to illustrate that distinction. I got to know Bob when I was a student at Duke University and he was the Campus Crusade for Christ director. Now, sports fans will know that Duke's men's basketball team often has contended for the national title. Alas, the Duke football team has suffered many losing seasons.

Bob notes that prediction can involve careful analysis of current events to make an educated guess about the future. Stock market analysts, political pollsters, social scientists, and CBS *Survivor* fans all seek to predict outcomes. But prophecy often involves events and situations hundreds of years apart or without apparent human connection. Bob explains that if someone were to study the Duke men's basketball team and announce they would win the national championship, and then it happened, that would be successful prediction. But if

someone evaluated the Duke *footbal*l team and announced they would win the national championship, that would be prophecy!

Could the 300 prophecies Jesus fulfilled have been fulfilled merely by chance? Peter Stoner, a California mathematician, once calculated the probability of just eight of these 300 prophecies coming true in one person due to chance alone. Using estimates that both he and classes of college students considered reasonable and conservative, Stoner concluded there was one chance in $10^{17}$ that those eight were fulfilled by fluke.

He says $10^{17}$ silver dollars would cover the state of Texas two feet deep. Mark one coin with red fingernail polish. Stir the whole batch thoroughly. What chance would a blindfolded person have of picking the marked coin on the first try? One in $10^{17}$, the same chance that just eight of the 300 prophecies "just happened" to come true in this man, Jesus.{33}

With all these signs, why wasn't more attention paid to Jesus' birth? No reporters with microphones and cameras waited outside the stable to interview the new mom. (Maybe if she'd had quints?)

Some back then were looking for a conquering king promised by Hebrew prophets and did not anticipate a lowly birth. Others were perhaps too entangled in their own self-importance or preoccupied with the details of life: working, families, relationships, emotions. Maybe they were a bit like us.

What does all this mean for us this Christmas?

## Today's Good News

Jesus' "good news" offers a chance to hook into God's unchanging love, to be forgiven of all wrong and to live forever with Him. He can help you accept yourself, replace anxiety with peace and provide the best friends you've ever

had.

If His news is so good, why do people still miss it today? Some are enmeshed in careers or relationships that offer little time for reflection. Chasing dollars blinds some. Family strife can make life a blur: teens experimenting with sex or drugs, a spouse wanting out. Western life itself can be exhausting: media overload, the rush to taxi kids or complete shopping, cellphones, beepers, PTA, soccer practice, e-mail, laundry, Web surfing . . . Help! Maybe you could use some time to reflect.

I suspect you've had hints of God's good news. Maybe you've admired the majesty of the universe and wondered Who was behind it. Perhaps a friend told you their story of faith. Maybe a magazine article got you thinking.

For eighteen years I heard the story of Jesus but did not understand it. The summer before entering university, I wrestled with concern over my own afterlife but gave up because it seemed too complicated. That fall I met some vibrant Christians whose love, joy, and enthusiasm attracted me.

They told me I could not earn eternal life. Rather I needed to receive Christ's free gift of forgiveness accomplished by His death for my sins and His resurrection. They told me all this would be a "gift of God; not . . . a result of works, so that no one . . . [could] boast" about it.{34} That was good news to me. I accepted His gift of forgiveness and have found Him to be a wonderful friend.

Life hasn't been perfect. I've had my share of domestic strife, job conflicts, and minor health struggles. God never promised perfection, painlessness, or complete prosperity in this life. But He does offer unusual peace, pardon from guilt, ultimate purpose, and the inner power to cope with any struggle. He promises to cause "all things to work together

for good" to those who love Him.{35} He is a friend who will never leave.{36}

Might this Christmas season be a good time for you to ask God to forgive you and become your friend? It's a decision that only you can make for yourself. You can simply talk to Him right now, ask Him to forgive you and become your friend forever. Then contact this station or visit the Web site Probe.org to learn more about a relationship with God.

Maybe there's some good news for you in the story of Jesus. Do you hear what I hear? Are you listening?

*This article is adapted from Rusty Wright, "Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?" *Pursuit* VII: 3, 1998, pp.12-15. Copyright © 1998 Rusty Wright. Used By Permission.

**Notes**

1. Names and some details in certain stories in this article have been altered for privacy while preserving the points of the stories. Details of stories that name me personally have not been changed.

2. Luke 2:10 NLT.

3. Adapted from Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, Calif: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972) 147-157 ff.

4. Micah 5:2 NLT.

5. Matthew 2:1 NASB.

6. Isaiah 7:14 NIV.

7. Matthew 1:18, 24, 25 NLT.

8. Genesis 22:18 NLT.

9. Genesis 21:12 NLT.

10. McDowell, op. cit., 154.

11. Numbers 24:17 NLT.

12. Luke 3:23, 34 NASB.

13. Matthew 27:46 NIV.

14. Psalm 22.

15. Psalm 22:7 NIV.

16. Psalm 22:16 NIV.

17. Psalm 22:18 NIV.

18. Matthew 27:39-44, 35; John 20:25.

19. Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:1,2.

20. Zechariah 9:9; John 12:15; Matthew 21:1-9.

21. Zechariah 11:12; Matthew 26:15, 27:3.

22. Zechariah 12:10; John 19:34, 37.

23. Isaiah 53:12; Matthew 27:38.

24. Isaiah 53:5; Zechariah 13:6; Matthew 27:26.

25. Psalm 34:20; John 19:33, 36.

26. Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:31-32.

27. See McDowell, op. cit., 185-273.

28. John 14:27.

29. Colossians 1:14.

30. Matthew 28: 18-20.

31. Galatians 5:22-23.

32. Bob Prall, *The Master Plot of the Bible* (Houston: Emmaus Books Trust, 1997) 56; Bob Prall, *As You Are Going… Make Disciples* (Houston: Emmaus Books Trust, 2001) 108-109.

33. Peter W. Stoner, *Science Speaks* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969) 99-112.

34. Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB.

35. Romans 8:28 NASB.

36. Hebrews 13:5.

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